

PUBLIC LIBRARY

— :: —

Class No. F

Book No. D-735

Accn. No. 15652

Date

**This book is returnable on or
before the date last stamped**

Library Form No. 4

This book was taken from the Library on the date last
stamped. It is returnable within 14 days.

9. MAR 1970

31-10-96

12.6 JUL 1970

13-10-127

(R)

26 JAN 1973

28.4.77

23.5.29/8134

12/12/87
13-11/14

HOT FOR CERTAINTIES

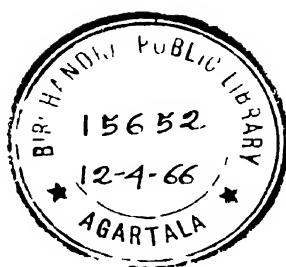
Hot for Certainties is the portrait of a boy coming to grips with 'the dusty answers' of life. One by one his idols are shattered, bit by bit his idealism turns to anger and cynicism. The only child of a broken home, David McIlrose has to contend with a domineering, possessive mother and an eccentric, hard-drinking father. He escapes from the difficulties of understanding his parents by seeking solace in the undemanding affection of his grandparents.

The snobbishness and hypocrisy he meets at his public school add to his confusion. He finds peace in the first fumbblings of adolescent sex – but not for long. His frustrated housemaster suspects him of homosexuality and enforces his premature departure from the school. His idyllic love affair crumbles. Then his mother's remarriage to a Cabinet Minister brings his disenchantment to a memorable climax.

There is humour and pathos in this story, and not a little disgust at the way in which people, selfishly and for their own ends, wound and kill a young man's innocence. Fresh, sensitive, deeply felt, this is the first novel of an author whose name is already widely known as a writer in other fields.

Robin Douglas-Home

Hot for Certainties



Longmans

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO LTD
48 Grosvenor Street, London W.1

*Associated companies, branches and representatives
throughout the world*

First published 1904

*Printed in Great Britain by
Northumberland Press Limited
Gateshead on Tyne*

‘ Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainties in this our life. . . . ’

George Meredith

Chapter 1

‘Mummy, why did you and Daddy get divorced?’

He had never asked her the question point-blank before, and she had never explained the reason voluntarily, although she often talked of his father.

It was the last Friday of the Easter holidays. The last holidays before his first term at Glazebrook.

Still five days to go. Five magic days. A hundred and twenty hours. Hours that he kept trying to stop in mid-motion, willing the minute hand of his wrist-watch to stay stationary. But it moved on relentless, however hard he stared.

They had been wonderful holidays, the best he could remember. But then, he supposed, all holidays seemed that on the last Friday. For three weeks they had been driving round, just his mother and he, and Hector his dog, pitching their tent in fields or at the side of country lanes. Sometimes the weather had been so fine that they had not even bothered to put up the tent, sleeping under the stars and waking with the grey dawn to the birdsong and the lowing of cows.

Now they lay in a glade of Savernake Forest, gazing up at the leaf-lattice chequering the late afternoon sun. Hector was digging busily at a hole down which a rabbit had disappeared as they entered the glade. Everything was quiet except for the dog’s little whines of excitement and the low drone of traffic on the main road. In two hours they would be home: the last phase of the holidays would begin. David was trying to put off that last phase for as long as he could. He hoped his question would make her forget the time. It was for that reason he had asked it, rather than for any very deep interest in her answer.

She was lighting a cigarette. At his question her beautiful dark eyes switched from the match flame to his face, hung there for a second, then returned to the flame. She took a deep puff and lay back in the grass. He turned on one elbow, and looked down at her. He guessed she would smile as she answered, and she did.

‘What a funny question to ask out of the blue like that, darling. Do you really want to know?’

‘Yes, Mummy. Tell me. Tell me why.’

‘Well, darling, I suppose it started with the war. Daddy went away and I hardly saw him at *all* for those six years, as you probably remember. You wouldn’t remember much *before* the war, but when we lived in Hampshire and Daddy worked at Portsmouth everything was wonderful. Don’t you remember how he used to put you on his knee at breakfast, and how you helped him write in the answers to the *Times* crossword? And when he showed you how to use the lawn-mower that day you fell and cut your hand by the rockery?’

‘Yes I remember all that,’ David said. But she was right – he couldn’t remember much else about his father. There was a dim picture of a tall figure, usually laughing, with a voice much deeper than anyone else’s, smelling of shaving-soap and something else which David later identified as last night’s whisky, always wearing his Old Glazebrookian tie and undoing a new packet of Gold Flake. Once, David remembered, he had been thrashed very hard for kicking Flash, the Labrador; once he had sat on his father’s knee in the car and been allowed to steer for a short distance. But nothing more. Only the letter that arrived on his birthday, full of mad drawings of aeroplanes dropping bombs on submarines flying the Red Ensign.

And the letter that had arrived three days after the divorce came out in the newspapers – two pages which David read in a state of numbness, not knowing whether to cry, or be relieved at the comparatively painless actuality of something he had secretly known about and feared for so long. ‘Your mother is a wonderful woman,’ the letter ended, ‘and you must do your very best as her only son to give her all the love she deserves, and that I myself have failed so miserably to give her.’ *I will* love her, I will, I will, David thought as he put down the letter, a lump clutching at his throat.

He had sensed the break-up was coming ever since his first term at prep school. No one mentioned the word divorce to him – he would not have known what it meant if they had. Some sixth sense told him all was not well with his parents. But the feeling remained unspoken. Wasn’t the war over now? Why did he not come back like everybody else’s father? Why did his mother never seem to know when he *was* coming back?

‘He’ll come back as soon as he can, darling. Don’t worry. I know he can’t wait to see us both again,’ she would say, looking away out of the window, or down at her sewing. But there was something in her tone of voice. . . .

That first term at school had made him sure. It was the custom to put up photographs of one’s parents on bedside lockers. It was also the custom for other boys to make rude remarks about their faces. Yet there was one boy in the dormitory, Haswell, whose parents, David noticed, were never insulted.

One evening when Haswell was in the sick-bay, David asked his next-door neighbour why no one ever made rude remarks about Haswell’s parents. The answer came in a kind of sacrilegious whisper: ‘Because they’re *DIVORCED*.’ With a flash of guilty understanding, the revelation came: that’s what his own parents were. *Or would be*. . . . He went hot under the bedclothes at the certainty of his thoughts. From then on he blushed whenever the word ‘divorce’ was mentioned.

‘We loved each other very much,’ his mother was saying. ‘But we sort of drifted apart. Because of the horrid war, more than anything, I suppose. He was away on board ship for such ages. I still love Daddy as much as ever. I didn’t want him to go away, *ever* – you know that, darling. I told him I would be ready waiting for him whenever he wanted, but he felt he couldn’t give me the love he used to. I still hope he’ll come back to me . . . I think he’ll always need me. Anyway, I’ve got you, David. God gave me you to love instead. My only point in life now is to give you *all* my love. We do have wonderful times together in the holidays, don’t we darling?’

‘Yes, Mummy.’

‘Will you miss me at Glazebrook as much as you did?’

‘Yes, Mummy. You know I will. You’d never marry another man, would you, like Haswell’s mother at school? She did, and he has a stepfather now. He hates him. You’d never do that, would you? Think how he’d spoil the holidays.’

She laughed: ‘Not while I’ve got you to look after me, darling. Anyway no one would want to marry me now – I’m much too old.’

‘But Haswell’s mother looks much older than you and *she* did.’

She laughed again: ‘Don’t worry, darling. Anyway, why have

you suddenly got this into your head. Perhaps I'd marry a millionaire who'd take you sailing on his yacht for the summer holidays. Think what fun that would be.'

David pouted and squashed the grass with his palm.

'I don't want to go on a yacht. I'd far rather go camping like this, with you and Hector.'

His mother looked round the glade.

'Where *is* Hector? You'd better call him. We *must* go, darling, or we'll never be back before Mrs Chubb leaves home. And I must see her to thank her for looking in every day while we've been away. Hector! Hector!'

David jumped up and rushed to the place where Hector had last been seen.

The dog had disappeared down a rabbit-hole, except for occasional glimpses of hind-legs and a mongrel's tail. David tugged him out by the hind-legs, and mother and son wandered slowly back to the car, the dog panting behind them. They did not speak at all on the drive home. David sat hoping they would have a breakdown or a puncture – anything to delay the start of the final act of the holidays. He calculated – only a hundred and eighteen hours to go. . . .

Two hours later, back in Sunningdale, a welcoming Mrs Chubb helped them lift the tent off the roof of the car as Hector ran barking round the lawn. It was good to be home in a way – if only there were not so few days left. They'd go so quickly, with fittings of new clothes, and packing, and checking lists.

That night, the first night in a bed for three weeks, David lay awake and re-lived the fun of the camping expedition. The smell of eggs frying in the open air, the beam of car headlights swinging through the tent, Hector growling at courting couples wandering past in the evening light.'

And, through it all, the guiding spirit of his mother – cooking, laughing, coping, talking, smoking, driving slowly however hard he urged her to go faster. He hated leaving her: it was three weeks before she could come and see him at school. How would he get through those first three weeks? A new boy again – would he be bullied perhaps? Like he had been before?

•

On Sunday morning mother and son went as usual to church.

She always went because she sang in the choir. He sat alone at the back of the church, trying to work out who was meant to be doing what in the situations in the stained-glass windows.

After church it had been arranged that he would bicycle over to have lunch and tea with Peter Jenkins. Peter lived about two miles away and had been to the same prep school as David. He had already been at Glazebrook for one term, in the same house that David was to join.

At lunch with the Jenkins parents, Peter told David what to expect at Glazebrook. David felt newly encouraged at the prospect of having Peter there as an ally. After lunch the two boys fooled about in the garden. Somehow Hector became entangled with Peter's legs and down fell Peter on the stones, cutting his elbow and knee quite badly.

'I think perhaps you'd better go home, David dear,' Mrs Jenkins whispered to David after she had washed and bandaged the cuts. 'He really ought to sit quiet for a bit, and he'll never do that if you're here. Shall I telephone your mother to tell her you'll be back early?'

David thought for a second.

'No thanks,' he said. 'I'll creep up and surprise her.'

'Well, don't frighten her too much, will you?' Mrs Jenkins laughed and wagged her index finger.

Bicycling home, Hector scurrying beside him, he was an Eskimo chief in a sleigh with his huskies, hurtling over the snow on the trail of a polar bear. Then a cowboy, riding the range in pursuit of a tribe of wild Indians who had kidnapped his mother and held her for ransom, and Hector was tracking their scent. Then a speed-cop after a master-spy, with Hector as a bloodhound. The hedges concealed enemy snipers and the trees became look-out towers, . . .

The wind in his face felt wonderfully clean. Suddenly he didn't mind so much about Glazebrook, and leaving his mother.

As he turned into the gate, he saw a car parked at the front door. He recognized it because it belonged to the Austins. Arthur Austin often came to practise on his mother's piano - David had seen him that morning after church, talking to her. Jenny Austin was interested in his mother's charities and looked after Hector if his mother went away during term time.

Funny – she hadn't told him the Austins were coming: they must have dropped in unexpectedly. To hear all about the camping holiday, probably. Oh, well, he'd surprise all three of them.

He propped the bicycle quietly up against the wall and crept round below window-level to the sitting-room french windows at the back. They were open. He poised ready to jump into the room: there was no sound of conversation. A furtive peep into the room: it was empty. Creeping through the house, his forefinger pointed like a revolver, he found the kitchen empty, too. They must all be looking at something upstairs. . . . He tiptoed to the top of the stairs and listened: all the bedroom doors were shut, but a low murmur came from his mother's room. Showing off her new wallpaper, he supposed, or talking clothes with Mrs Austin.

He crept down the passage. Hector followed with cocked ears. He remembered thinking the sound was oddly quiet for normal conversation. Hector put his nose at the door crack and sniffed loudly. A slow turn of the door-handle and he burst into the bedroom with a cry of 'Stick 'em up!' The 'up' faded in his throat to become a strangled croak.

There was a confused jumble of flesh on the bed which at first he couldn't untangle. He remembered noticing with a shock that a lot of it seemed to be covered in black hair. Two wide-eyed faces looked at him. One was his mother's: the other one, immediately above hers, was Arthur Austin's. Neither of them spoke. Hector jumped on the bed wagging his tail.

He left the door open and rushed downstairs into the garden, shaking. He could not think clearly: the scene in the bedroom clung to his mind's eye in vivid detail. Tears pricked the backs of his eyes as he grabbed his bicycle handlebars.

Then he saw the Austins' car. Through his tears the head-lamps seemed to be grinning at him. It was a shiny black Wolseley saloon, polished by Mr Austin regularly every weekend. He knew that – he had helped Mr Austin once and had been allowed, as a great privilege, to reverse it into the garage afterwards. •

He flung the bicycle down and picked up a handful of stones from the drive. Jagged, gravelly stones. He ground them as hard as he could into the car's paintwork, scribbling and scratching

and gouging, again and again and again, all over the bonnet, the wings, the doors, till blood mixed with the dirt on his fingers.

‘David,’ he heard his mother’s voice calling. ‘David, darling.’

He picked up the bicycle and jumped into the saddle, forcing the pedals down, down, down, down. . . .

Chapter 2

'Tomorrow we all go into training, worse luck,' said Peter Jenkins. 'Last ice-cream soda for three months – unless you want to risk it and get beaten. And I can tell you: being beaten by Hemsley is no joke. Wrists like an ox.'

He and David were sitting in Ransom's, the School shop. It was the first Saturday of the autumn term, David's second. On the next day rigid training was due to start for the whole school, and Ransom's sales would take their annual sharp curve downwards. No sweets, no fizzy drinks, no ice-creams. Football was law. Play up the School and all that.

Their ice-cream sodas tasted especially sweet. As they noisily sucked the last bubbles up through their straws, David said, 'We'd better have one more each, eh? Got to keep us going till December, remember.'

Peter nodded.

'Two more strawberry ice-cream sodas please, miss,' David called to the white-coated young waitress.

'Well, well. Look who's going to be sweating pure strawberry ice on Monday afternoon.' Gladwyn, a friend of Peter's, came over to the table and sat down.

'Make that one more please, miss,' Gladwyn called. Then to the table: 'What a swizz this training is, honestly. I'm sure it won't make a bit of difference to my game. Still, have to watch it – I'm fagging for Collings. Takes the thing incredibly seriously. Wouldn't have got his School Colours at sixteen if he didn't, I suppose.'

Gladwyn turned to David: 'Who are you fagging for this term?'

'Captain of the House – Hemsley,' said David, proudly.

The waitress was placing out the three glasses on the table. As David spoke, she looked sharply at him, and, in doing so, knocked over one of the glasses. The pink foam swilled over the table and on to the floor.

'Oh, I'm very sorry, sir,' she said nervously. 'I'll get you another one right now. Just hold on while I wipe up this mess.'

The three boys said nothing till she had gone back to the counter.

'Clumsy idiot, that girl,' said Peter.

'Doesn't matter. *We* won't pay for it,' said Gladwyn. . . .

Fifteen minutes later the boys got up and made for the door. David was last of the three. He was about to follow them out when he heard the waitress's voice behind him: 'Excuse me, sir. You've left this behind.'

He turned and looked at her outstretched hand. In it was an envelope with a name written on it in large ill-formed capital letters. The name was LORD HEMSLEY. . . . At the top, underlined, was the word PRIVATE.

'I didn't leave that,' he said, surprised.

He looked at her face for the first time. A pair of bright little blue eyes fixed his with an almost hunted desperation. It was quite a pretty little face, in spite of no make-up.

The waitress still held the envelope out to him. She looked round quickly to see if the manageress was looking. There was a convenient pillar in the way.

She came closer and said in a low urgent voice, 'Here, please take this and give it to him. Please *give* it to him. That's all. Sorry, but I must go now.' She pressed the envelope into his hand and walked quickly away, busying herself with the cloth she carried over one arm.

A question hung on David's lips. For a moment he was going to follow her to ask it. But there was something in the urgency of her movements and the seriousness of her expression that stopped him.

'What are you doing? Thought you'd fallen down a manhole or something.' It was Peter at the door.

David stuffed the envelope into his pocket.

'Sorry. Left my cap. . . .'

His secrecy about the envelope was a reflex action, a subconscious imitation of the girl's own behaviour. Out of loyalty to Hemsley in a way, he supposed on the way back to the house. Should he deliver it? Why not? But why couldn't she write through the post in the ordinary way? Why was she corresponding with Hemsley anyway?

The letter-rack was at the bottom of the stairs in the house, a

board covered with green baize, with criss-cross strips of material under which envelopes were tucked. No: she had said 'give it to him'.

Peter was still beside him.

'Just going to tidy up Hemsley's room,' said David when they reached the first landing.

'At this time of day?'

'Yes. There are some things lying about. . . .'

David knocked on Hemsley's door, but he knew there would be no one in – Hemsley had said the night before he would need his football clothes for a practice game. He did not want to hand over the envelope in person. Not for any worked-out reason. But the same sense that had told him to keep the envelope secret from Peter and Gladwyn warned him it might be better not to be associated with the envelope at all. That look in the girl's eyes. . . .

In Hemsley's room he took the envelope out of his pocket. It was slightly crumpled. He tried to straighten it out. He held it up to the light to see if he could read what was inside. The paper was too thick. It felt heavy. There must be several pages.

He propped it up on the desk, checked from the door that it could be easily seen, and went out with a sense of relief. As he closed the door, Hemsley appeared at the top of the stairs. He was in dirty football clothes, stockinged feet, his sweater tied round his neck, black hair tousled, knees hairy and muddy. He looked every inch the athletic hero – tall, lithe, casual, virile.

'Ha-ha, the conscientious Melrose. Just the fellow I wanted to see,' he boomed. 'Been tidying up? Good show. All ready for me to untidy again.' He laughed loudly.

David opened the door and followed him into the room. Hemsley threw off his sweater and started undoing his shirt buttons.

'Finished early. First game of the year. Good to get all the old muscles working again. God, one gets out of training, though. Stiffening up already.'

Hemsley threw his shirt on the floor. David folded the sweater, placing himself directly between Hemsley and the envelope. The smell of sweat, mud and wet stockings filled the room.

'Very silent today, Melrose? Second term's always the worst. Liven up, now. Picked you specially as my fag this term. Thought

you looked OK. Maddox said you were pretty hot stuff for a new boy last term.'

David, blushing with pleasure, made a small noise of acknowledgement. Hemsley took off his stockings, threw them into the pile at David's feet. He stood there in his shorts, his left hand stroking the mass of black hair on his chest, watching David unravel the muddy stockings. He started to undo his shorts and turned towards the window as if looking for someone in the windows of the house opposite. The shorts fell down. He stepped out of them, still looking out of the window, scratching the thick hair on his belly. David looked at the house captain with guilty fascination. It was the first time he had ever seen the front of a naked man. He noticed two scars, one appendix, and another lower down on the other side, almost hidden in the black hair.

Hemsley caught David's eye on him. David's cheeks went hot, his stomach hollow. In the embarrassment of the moment he forgot the envelope and moved towards the door.

'Where are you going, Melrose?'

'I thought . . . I'd start your bath running.'

'Oh yes. Good idea.'

The house captain stood squarely in front of him, one hand still caressing his belly hair. David wanted to look again, but dared only a quick glance as he turned to open the door.

In the passage, walking towards the bathroom, he could feel his blood pounding. The sight of the naked Hemsley stood etched in his mind. Suddenly he felt a strong desire to go back into that room and look again. Perhaps Hemsley would forget his towel, then he could bring it to him and see him naked in the bath.

The strength of his thoughts perturbed him. His throat felt constricted, his heart thumped as he turned on the taps. They were old taps, the large brass type, and at full volume the noise of water made loud echoes in the small bathroom.

David swirled the water with his right hand, adjusting the taps to the correct temperature. He thought about his own naked body compared to Hemsley's. Would he ever grow as hairy as that? Or as big as that? What was Hemsley - eighteen? And he was thirteen. In five years could he change that much? He longed to be hairy all over, hated the clean smoothness of his own stomach.

A hand tapped his shoulder: David jumped round. It was

Hemsley, a towel round his waist. In his hand he held the envelope. David had forgotten about the envelope.

Hemsley beckoned to turn off the taps and sat down on the wooden bench beside the bath. He closed the door with a foot and bolted it.

‘Was this on my desk when you first went in this afternoon?’

He held up the envelope: David saw it was now empty. He had intended to disclaim all knowledge of the envelope. But he knew the colour rising in his cheeks had already given him away.

‘I put it there.’ He looked at the floor.

‘Why didn’t you tell me, Melrose?’

‘I don’t know. I should have done.’

‘How did you get hold of it?’

A pause.

‘A waitress in Ransom’s gave it to me to give to you.’

‘I see. . . . Now, Melrose. I picked you as my guy specially. I thought you were reliable, a good fellow. I want you to do something for me. It’s most important I should be able to trust you. Trust you completely. Understand me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will you do that something for me? I must be able to rely on you. Can’t explain. All I can say is it’s very important. For me, for you, for the house, for everything. Will you do it?’

‘Yes – if I can, I will.’

‘Good. Now will you swear to me you will completely forget you were ever given this, ever put it in my room? Put it right out of your mind. It never happened, see?’

David felt relieved. He was expecting some far more difficult task.

‘Of course. I’ll forget it.’

‘You swear?’

‘I swear.’

‘Thank you.’

Hemsley stood up and took off the towel, throwing it behind him on the bench. He stepped into the bath. Once again David took a long avid look at the powerful body. He turned to unbolt the door.

‘Oh, Melrose.’

‘Yes?’

‘Take that and burn it, will you?’

He nodded at the bench. Beside the towel lay the envelope. David picked up the piece of paper.

‘Remember,’ said Hemsley.

Hemsley was smiling. David smiled back.

‘I’ll remember.’

Everyone in the school, masters and boys alike, knew Hemsley. In the summer term, for the last two seasons, he had batted at No. 3 in the Eleven, and kept the crowd jumping in their deck-chairs. His 125 not out in 140 minutes in the Lords match was labelled by such pundits as Mr Bethamy and Mr Constone-Smith – the two oldest masters and both ex-members of the School Eleven – as ‘the best schoolboy’s innings within living memory’.

In the winter terms he caused an equal sensation at stand-off half for the Rugby XV, of which he was now, after three years with his colours, the captain.

It was not only on the field of play that he was conspicuous. Even walking down the street he made an eye-catching figure, with his height and his tangled black hair falling over his forehead. The younger boys would gaze in awe at this legend of the playing-fields in the near flesh. Hemsley revelled in their admiring looks, winking at familiar faces, grinning at strangers, always acting. He knew his appeal and wallowed delightedly in it.

There was only one sphere in which he failed – his books. Everyone cheered when Hemsley’s name was read out at the end-of-term sessions announcing final orders. Everyone cheered – not because of any academic achievement, but because his name was always read out last. At the bottom. People said he had only passed his School Certificate because Custard – Mr Luskard, the School cricket coach, who had happened to be Hemsley’s invigilator – had had a premature look at the exam papers and told Hemsley the questions (and some said the answers, too) in advance.

When anyone asked him how on earth he had passed, Hemsley would give a bull-like roar and say, ‘Good old Custard’. Ever since the story had become popular knowledge among the boys, old Custard had been treated by his younger pupils with markedly more respect.

At the end of the Easter term that year, there had been a vacancy for house captain in Squires-Birch's house. It was normal practice at Glazebrook for the captain of one of the seven houses to be top, or near top, of the house in School order. Hemsley was fifth in the house, but Squires-Birch – or Squitters as he was always called by his pupils – had summoned his remaining top four boys to his dark, grim little study before breakfast on the last Sunday of the term.

'Sit down, will you. Make yourse'ves comfortable,' he said in his squeaky voice. 'I want to talk to you about my choice of house captain for next term. Normally it would have been one of you four. You are all good members of the School, good members of the house, too. I have no feeling of doubt about any one of you having the character or ability to be my captain.'

A pause while he rootled among the old pipes on his desk and picked a small charred one, which he put in his mouth. It made his words wet and lispy.

'But occasionally in the life of a house an outstanding character emerges. He can be an outstanding scholar; he can be an outstanding athlete; he can be neither of those, but simply an outstanding personality with natural qualities of leadership and authority. What the Greeks truly meant by an aristocrat.'

Squitters paused to light his pipe.

'When such a character emerges, I feel it is only right he should be as fully rewarded by his housemaster as possible. I have had a house for eleven years now, and I rather pride myself on my past choice of captains. So I have full faith in my next choice and am asking for your full support for that choice. Really I have no need to ask, because you would obviously give it.'

Squitters' pipe had gone out. Dirty sucking noises emanated from it as he inhaled. He flicked it away from him and a spattering of spit hit the top of the fireplace. The boys looked knowingly at each other, hiding their grins behind their hands: this spattering of spit was a regular ritual in Squitters' study.

'In this house now we are lucky enough to have an obviously outstanding character. You must know to whom I refer. He is not the top of the house academically' – he gave a private little titter and blinked his eyes in mock guilt over the top of his spectacles to see if the boys were laughing too – 'but no matter. One

cannot have everything, and he more than makes up for his somewhat . . . *pedestrian* approach to his studies by his *élan* on the field of play. Yes – it is Charles Hemsley. I have chosen him to be captain next term. I would like to reward him for all that he has done to make his own name, and the name of this house, so famous – so feared – on the playing fields of Glazebrook. Never before, in my eleven years as housemaster, have we held as many as seventeen cups. Of course, you are all deserving of credit: it is the team that has won. But Charles Hemsley has led those teams and inspired them, as I'm sure you will all agree.'

The four heads nodded automatically. Squitters' bright little eyes stared at them over his half-lensed spectacles with the black rims except on the top of the lenses which had no rims. He went on:

'So Hemsley will be captain. I want my house to be run by the best man for the job, and I consider that man is Hemsley. That, after all, is the true meaning of the word aristocracy – rule by the best. But in this case it is indeed apt that the captaincy should be' – he paused and allowed himself another private smirk – 'in the hands of a true aristocrat. . . .'

'That's what one might call the stalest news of the year,' said one of the four boys as they climbed the stairs to Hemsley's room. The news would not come as a surprise to anyone. Everyone in the house knew Hemsley had always been Squitters' blue-eyed boy: it was inevitable he would be appointed captain. And no one would resent the appointment.

They burst into Hemsley's room babbling their congratulations. Hemsley was looking in the mirror brushing his hair.

'Oh, thanks awfully,' he said with a cavalier 'ha-ha'. 'Squitters told me last night. The old snob said he thought he ought to have a coronet put on the house writing-paper. Now let's go and celebrate.'

If Hemsley was regarded in the school as an Achilles, David Melrose, as his fag, regarded himself as a Patroclus.

'Coo, Melrose are you his fag? What's he like?' his wide-eyed colleagues in the Lower School said at the beginning of that winter term, when the conversation inevitably turned to Hems-

ley's football skill and David was able to interpolate a smug 'I'm fagging for him.'

David looked forward to every evening when he could go down to Hemsley's room, light his fire, make his toast for tea, and fold up the sweaty, muddy, but heroic football garments. He almost hoped the term would never end – when his hero would leave and his position lose its glamour, when all his reflected glory would fade.

On the first Monday afternoon, two days after the incident of the waitress and the letter, there was a compulsory house cross-country run to start off the strict period of training. The course was about three miles long, ending with a complete circuit of the School Field, a square of four full-size football pitches.

Hemsley led the way, resplendent in shirt and stockings, with the forty-two members of Squires-Birch's house behind him in an increasingly straggly line. He set the brisk pace one would expect from a School miler. David found it fairly easy to keep up, once he caught the rhythm and got over the first out-of-breath feeling.

Mud splashed in his face from the shoes of the boys in front. As he crossed a bumpy path which separated the School Field from Lower School Field, he slipped on a stone and almost fell. His right ankle felt acutely painful when he tried to put his weight on it.

Other members of the house ran past shouting, 'Come on, Melrose: keep going. You know the penalty for not finishing in time.'

The rule was that anyone finishing more than three minutes after Hemsley had to go on a cross-country run for every day that week. David had no wish to do that.

He hobbled on as best he could, each step on his right foot sending a shooting pain up his leg that made him bite his lower lip. Half way round the School Field circuit he was doing little more than limping at a slow walk. He was now the last. There were some ten boys between him and the finishing line. He heard the shouts of 'Come on, Melrose,' but kept his eyes fixed on each yard of ground he covered.

Then a voice said at his side, 'Cricked your ankle, Melrose? Bad luck. Keep going though – only another two hundred yards. Even

if it hurts, try using your ankle. Best thing to do is stop it stiffening up.'

Hemsley had run back from the finishing line. The house captain held up a stop-watch as he jogged along beside David.

'You've got a whole minute left. Plenty of time. Look.'

David looked at the stop-watch, then at Hemsley.

Hemsley winked.

The hand on the stop-watch was stationary.

Chapter 3

One evening three weeks after the beginning of term, David Melrose was going back to his house. He had been at a practice of the Musical Society: the Society met at 6.30 p.m. every Saturday to prepare for their performance at the School Concert, held at the end of every term.

It was a sharp October night with a hint of frost in the air. His breath showed in the air as he passed each street lamp on the road down to Squires-Birch's. He turned into the dark lane that led to his house and Brandley's next to it. The lane ran parallel to the street, separated by a high wall, and what light there was came from the street lamps over the wall. There were holly-trees and yew-bushes on each side, giving the place a cold, unfriendly atmosphere even when the sun shone. For the lane never received direct sunlight, and it had that dank smell that lingers in permanently sunless places.

As he walked into the wide circle of light from the bulb over the house door, he heard a noise in the bushes to his right. He climbed the three stone steps, was about to press the bell – after 5.30 boys had to be let in and out by the 'house jobman' on presentation of a ticket signed by a master – when there was a second, louder noise in the bushes. The quiet voice of a girl said, 'Please, sir, can I speak to you a minute. *Please.*'

He started in the stillness. The voice sounded familiar. He dimly saw a small figure five yards from him, beside the nearest yew-bush.

'*Please.* I've got to speak to you.'

'Why?' he said softly. 'Who are you?'

'I gave you that letter in Ransom's. Remember?'

Of course – he remembered the same urgency in her 'please' on that first Saturday of term. Since that day he had not been to Ransom's because of the training régime. The letter incident had completely slipped from his mind.

'What do you want me to do? I can't stay because they put the time I left the Music Room on my ticket and they'll want to know where I've been when I hand it in here.'

‘You’d better come out of the light. Someone might look out of the windows. Here – come into the bushes. It’s dark.’

David looked at the lit windows above him. He recognized the window immediately over the door: it was Hemsley’s. Furtively, with a quick look down the lane behind him to see if anyone was following, he tiptoed down the steps towards the yew-bush.

‘I can only stay a minute. What do you want?’

He instinctively whispered.

He could just make out her features. She was wearing a patterned head-scarf and a dark coat. Her eyes caught what little light penetrated the dark corner. They shone out of her face like two torch bulbs lit by an almost dead battery.

‘You delivered my letter, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘To him personally?’

‘Er . . . yes.’

‘Did he say anything about me?’

David paused: ‘Not really, no. He just said I was to forget the whole thing, not to tell anyone else about it.’

Her eyes searched his face in the near darkness. David felt irritation rising inside him. Why should she be asking him these questions, this girl? What had Hemsley to do with her, anyway? And why should he be late on his ticket and get into trouble just because of some stupid little waitress?

‘Look, I’m sorry but I must go in now. And I can’t deliver any more letters for you. You’ll have to send them through the post.’

‘I tried that. I wrote to him at home in the holidays. Found his address in the School list. Wrote to him three times. And there was a letter waiting for him here when he got back from the holidays. But he never answered. So I had to try something else – I was going to slip that letter through the house post-box myself, but when I heard you say you were his fag I thought it might be better if you took it. Safer. I didn’t want to be seen, you see.’

‘I don’t see how I can help, really.’ David started to move towards the steps.

‘No, no. *Please* don’t go. You must help me. Just this once. It’s very important, see. You don’t realize. It’s *very* important.’ Her whispers were loud, sibilant.

Her hand gripped his elbow. He stood still, not knowing whether to stay or go. Her hand went down his arm and touched his knuckles. Her fingers were very cold. She held his hand in a tight squeeze.

David felt uncomfortable. He began to hate this girl. *

'Why do you have to write to Hemsley anyway?' he said angrily.

'I'll tell you,' she said after a moment. 'I'll have to tell you to get you to understand. Perhaps you won't even then. But it's worth a try.'

She sighed. Her whispers were quiet now, steady: 'This is something I've never told anyone. Except him, that is, in my letters. And he hasn't seen me since. Promise not to tell anyone else what I'm going to tell you? You can tell *him*, if you like, but he knows already. But no one else. No one else in the world. Because it's an important thing. I don't want anyone to get into trouble. Especially him. That's why I need your help, don't you see? You like him, don't you? You're his fag, aren't you?'

'Yes. I like him.'

'Well, listen. *Believe* me. . . .' She swallowed twice. David could hear the gulps in her throat. Let her say this, he was thinking, then I can get away.

'I'm . . . pregnant. Do you know what that is? It means . . . I'm . . . going to have a baby and *he's* the father.'

It couldn't be true. *Hemsley? And this girl? Having a baby?*

He felt an urge to wrestle away from her and rush into the house, blocking his ears against anything else she might say. But she held his arm in a firm grip, sensing his thoughts from his expression.

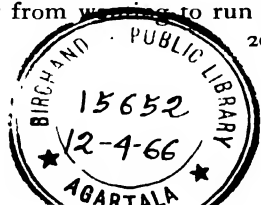
'You don't believe me? I promise you, I swear it's true. I swear it.'

'I . . . I can't believe -' David whispered hoarsely.

She cut his sentence off.

'You've *got* to. There's no reason why you should, I suppose. But you've *got* to. What would be the point of saying that if it wasn't true? I'm not that kind of girl, honest I'm not. Do I *look* that kind of girl?'

Her words were coming to David through a haze of bewilderment. Far from wanting to run into the house, as he had a few



minutes before, he now felt rooted to the ground. Was this really happening to him, David Melrose, outside the door of Squires-Birch's House, Glazebrook School?

'Do I *look* that kind of girl?' she repeated fiercely, shaking his arm to get him to look at her face. David lifted his head. By now his eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light. It was a clear face, well-formed, round and soft, with a delicate small mouth. A piece of fair hair jutted out under her scarf and swept across her forehead. He could not see if she was wearing make-up, but he remembered that day at Ransom's she wore no lipstick. It was a kind face, a *nice* face. It was the sort of face his mother would call pretty. It reminded him slightly of a canary he had once had.

He had to admit to himself she did not look wicked.

'No,' he said.

'You believe me then?'

David struggled with his conscience. He wanted to believe the face in front of him, but to do so would be to accept that his idol, Hemsley, had committed what seemed a crime and a terrible sin.

He could not bring himself to say yes or no. He did not know what to believe.

'Listen,' she said. 'Do you know what people have to do before a baby can come? Do you understand all about that? Well, that's what happened. Between him and me. During the summer term we used to meet, Sunday evenings mostly. He was always playing cricket the other evenings. Over the other side of the canal. There's a lot of bracken. I loved him: he said he loved me, but you wouldn't understand that bit. Doesn't matter now, though I still love him. Anyway, at the end of term we parted the best of friends and he said, "Write to me, Marilyn. See you next term." Everything was fine. Then I began to get worried 'bout . . . well, certain things happen to a woman when she's going to have a baby, see. I didn't believe it at first, but then in August I was certain. I wrote to him. But he never answered. I thought perhaps he'd been away from home, so I wrote to him here so's he'd get the letter when he got back. I had to tell him by letter because I couldn't tell him in Ransom's, you see, could I? I thought he'd come in to see me, but he's never come near the place this term. I saw him one day playing football but I couldn't do anything. All those people around him. He looked the other

way when he saw me and hurried off with a lot of other boys. See, it's got to be kept secret because otherwise he'd get sacked, wouldn't he? And I couldn't bear that to happen. It's as much my fault. More, in a way, I suppose. Always the girl's fault really, isn't it? Oh, no, you wouldn't know about that yet.'

She gave a resigned laugh.

'It's not that I want him to marry me. Nothing silly like that. Me marry a lord! No, it's not that. It's just that I want to *have* this baby. I don't care what other people think – except . . . well, I just want to have my baby, love him, take care of him. But I live in a foster-home, see. They're not my real parents – *they* were killed in a crash when I was five. Mr and Mrs Flood, they've looked after me ever since. No children of their own. The thing is, I haven't told them about all this. Haven't dared. It would break their heart, me letting them down like this. They're very religious, see – he's the verger in the church and she's always helping him. I never told them when I used to meet Cha . . . him because I knew they'd worry. "Don't go getting any fancy ideas about any of those young lads now, Marilyn," they said when I took on the job at Ransom's. And I knew they were right. . . . But I had my own reasons. I thought they were good ones.

'But the point is, I want to leave them, have the baby somewhere on my own. So they won't know. At least not till afterwards. That's what I keep writing about – to him. See, I can't afford to go away. I've got no family – they're in South Africa, all my uncles and aunts, like. I've no money at all, only a pound or two in the Post Office Savings. I only get four pounds a week at Ransom's, and I give two of those to Ma for my keep. See what I mean, don't you? I want *him* to give me enough money to go away somewhere and have the baby on my own. *His* baby. London, perhaps. Not a lot of money. Just enough for board and lodging . . . things for the baby. I asked him for fifty pounds – that's all I'd need. Surely it wouldn't be too much for him? After that I can get a better job, in London perhaps. Pay's better there. I'm not so worried about then. It's now. I know he could afford it, or get it from his family. He told me all about their place in Leicestershire, butlers and maids and things. Sixty bedrooms. Surely he could get a bit just for now, couldn't he? I mean, it is *his* baby too, isn't it? Don't you think I'm right to ask him?

What's your name – apart from Melrose? I heard them call you that in Ransom's.'

'David.'

'David – that's a nice name. Mine's Marilyn. Will you help? Please, David. You're the only person who can.'

'I . . . don't know . . . how . . .'

'What, don't you believe me then?'

'Yes, but . . . are you sure it's *his* baby? I mean, how do you know?'

'David, you'll have to believe me when I say this, but he's the only boy I've ever . . . gone with like that. Honest he is. I promise you.'

'But . . . can you prove it?'

'Well, I don't suppose I could in a court or somewhere like that. Naturally there weren't any witnesses. I never told anyone because he made me promise not to. And I'm sure *he's* not told anyone. Do you mean prove it to you? Do you mean it's you who wants the proof, then?'

'I suppose . . . yes . . . in a way.'

'Well, his full name is Charles Belvedere Melchior, Viscount Hemsley, and he lives at Westwick Hall, Briggsley, Leicestershire. He's eighteen, his birthday is on 2 June. He has a sister called Sophia and a brother called Henry, both younger than him.'

'You could have found out all that from someone else.'

'Yes, I suppose I could. Well, what can I tell you to convince you, David?'

David was still half fighting against accepting what she said, but he could not bring himself to dismiss her whole story just like that. She seemed too genuine. In her words, in her face.

'Did he write to you ever?' he asked hopefully.

'No, never. Wish he had. I used to miss him in the holidays. Listen. I've an idea. There's one way to prove this. You know him, don't you, you're his fag, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you see him when he's . . . changing, like?'

'Yes – sometimes.'

'Ever see him completely . . . in the nude?'

'Yes.'

'Front-ways on?'

'Yes.'

'Well, he has a long appendix scar, doesn't he?'

'Yes . . . but . . .'

'Wait a tick. That's not all. Over on the other side, lower down, he has another scar, doesn't he?'

David felt hot.

'Yes.'

'Well, now are you satisfied I'm not telling lies?'

'But are you *sure* you're going to have a baby?'

'Look,' she said fiercely. 'Look at this.'

She opened the buttons on her coat and turned towards the light. David looked at her stomach. She was wearing a dark, loose, pleated skirt. What should he look for? He remembered that when Aunt Rachel was having a baby she stuck out a mile and no mistake about it. But this stomach seemed fairly normal, a bit fat perhaps. How was he to know she was not just fat? Especially in that bad light.

'Well?'

'It . . . just looks a bit fat.'

'Here, give me your hand.'

She placed his hand on her stomach and moved it up and down.

'Can't you *feel* it?' she asked desperately.

David did not know what he should feel for. A lump? The shape of a baby's head? What?

'Not really.' By now he was thoroughly ill at ease. But she held his hand tightly in hers.

'Wait a minute,' she said. She lifted her skirt with her other hand and pulled at something.

Suddenly David felt a warm softness in his palm. His hand was on her bare stomach. She was moving his hand round, holding it firmly on the skin.

'Can't you feel it now? That's not fat, is it? How could that be fat?'

He pulled his hand away sharply, knocking her arm.

'Sorry,' he said breathlessly, moving away. 'I must go in now. I *must go now*.' He ran towards the steps.

She called urgently, '*Please* help me - I'll be by the bridge

over the canal at three-thirty tomorrow.' He plunged his thumb viciously on to the bell.

After Prayers, David sat on the edge of his bed, chin in hands, staring unseeing at the pattern on the carpet. He had been too late for supper, but he had not felt hungry, anyway.

During Prayers he had looked at the top table through a crack between his fingers. Hemsley's head was buried in his hands in an attitude of devout prayer. Could it be true? Could he honestly have done all she said? It was not Hemsley's refusal to answer her letters or see her that most unsettled David: it was the idea of Hemsley and her, lying together in the bracken. . . . He felt uncomfortable at harbouring such thoughts during Prayers. Squitters' reedy voice piped on, but David was not listening. The 'Amen' from forty boys' throats roused him roughly from his thoughts, and he looked at the faces of the boys round him, afraid that perhaps one of them might be a mind-reader and recognize what had been going on in his head.

He ran upstairs without speaking to anyone, undressed quickly. Now he sat in his pyjamas, an empty, clawing feeling in his stomach, partly from hunger, partly from a worry about what he should do. Should he confront Hemsley? He did not dare. And what good could that do? Hemsley would probably be furious with him: it was none of his business, really. Should he tell Squitters? No, that was out of the question. He obviously could not tell anyone else because, if it was all true, Hemsley would be sacked, and that would be terrible; and if it was not true, then he would get into trouble for repeating vicious lies and for staying out late talking to waitresses. He supposed he would get into trouble for being late anyway. Fred had looked at the time on his ticket and said, 'Says 7.45 here, Mr. Melrose, and it's now 8.25. Have to report you for this, you know, don't you?'

He was just thinking up an excuse for Squitters that would hold water, something like stopping to help a driver with a punctured tyre change his wheel, when there was a loud double-knock on his door. The door opened briskly. It was Hemsley. David stood up. Hemsley shut the door and leaned against it, smiling, wagging a white ticket in his hand. .

'The Master has passed this on to me to investigate, Melrose.

He's out at a lecture but I've got to see him first thing tomorrow morning with an explanation. Have you got one? Forty minutes to get back from the Music Room? What on earth were you doing? Got a girl friend or something?'

David blushed at the relevance of the remark. Damn, why did he always have to blush so easily?

'I'm sorry. I helped a man with a puncture. In the street, just by Landing's. He asked me and I said I would.'

'That was good of you. Don't you know the rule about tickets after lock-up?'

'Yes.'

'Why do you think the time is written on them at both ends if it's not to see you go straight from one place to another?'

David said nothing.

'What make of car was it?'

'What?'

'The car that had the puncture?'

'Er . . . an Austin.'

'What colour?'

'Black.'

'Which wheel was it?'

'The back.'

'Which one?'

' . . . The one nearest the pavement.'

'What was the number of the car?'

'Er . . . I didn't see. It was too dark.'

'Of *course* you didn't see, Melrose. Of *course* you didn't, did you?'

'No.'

'And do you know why you didn't see, Melrose?'

'Because it was too dark.'

'No, that's not the reason at all, is it, Melrose?'

'Yes.'

'No it's *not*.' Hemsley spat out the word. 'The reason you didn't see the number is because there *was* no number. Because there was no car, was there, Melrose?'

'Yes.'

'Look, don't lie to me any more. You'll be in worse trouble than you're in already. I know why you were late, so don't bang

on with that cock-and-bull story about a puncture. That's why I went and got your ticket off Fred and said I'd find out why you were late and tell the Master myself. The Master hasn't seen this ticket: he doesn't even know you were late. And he won't know unless *you* tell him, or unless you go on lying. In which case I'll have to. You see, Melrose, I *know* why you were late. Perhaps you forget where my window is.'

David looked up at him sharply.

'Sit down, Melrose. I want to have a long talk with you.'

David sat slowly down on the edge of his bed. Hemsley walked over to the desk chair and put one leg astride it, sitting down with its back to his front. He rested his arms on the top of the chair-back.

'Just before the supper bell rang I heard the sound of voices outside my window. I looked out and saw you standing just in the bushes by the door. But it wasn't you who was talking, was it, Melrose?'

'No.'

'Who was it then?'

David clenched his jaw.

'It was a girl, wasn't it, Melrose?'

A pause.

'Yes,' David whispered.

'Which girl was it?'

'The girl in Ransom's. The girl who gave me the letter for you.'

Hemsley raised his head.

'I thought so. And what was she saying that kept you standing in the bushes for three-quarters of an hour?'

'I . . . I can't remember.'

'Don't be an idiot, Melrose. You know you can remember. You had better tell me. Tell me everything. Otherwise you could be in very serious trouble.'

David swallowed twice. His nails were biting into his palms, his toes twisting in his slippers.

'She said . . .'

'Yes. Go on.'

'She said - she was going to . . . have a baby.'

'What else, Melrose?'

'And she said . . . you were . . . the father.'

David sighed at having got the words out. He dared not look at Hemsley. Another silence. Then:

'And did you believe her?'

Hemsley's voice was soft, menacing.

'I . . . I don't know. . . .'

'Now listen, Melrose. Listen very carefully. What that girl said to you is a very serious thing indeed. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'That girl is a common little slut who's out for one thing and one thing only – money. She'll stop at nothing to get it. She is a tart. Do you know what a tart is? A girl who sleeps with men for money. That's what she does. She's well-known for it among the older boys. What's happened is she finds she's going to have a baby and now she's trying to make more money out of *that*, see? Do you see?'

David nodded his head fractionally. He did not really see at all.

Hemsley went on, 'You don't really see, do you? Look – she finds she's going to have a baby. An illegitimate baby. So she thinks out how can she make some money to pay for the time that she won't be able to work. That letter you brought – well, that's what it said: could I give her some money to help her with the baby. Why did she pick on me? – well, I suppose I'm fairly well-known. Being a filthy little snob she probably thought anyone with a title must be not only rich but a sucker, too. How could I possibly give her fifty pounds even if I wanted to? I'd have to ask my father and he wouldn't cough up without wanting to know what it was for. I mean, I'd like to help the girl in a way but don't you see how dangerous it would be? She could almost prove then that I had something to do with the baby. Obviously I wouldn't have given her fifty pounds if I hadn't, would I? That's the way her scheming little mind works, you see – playing on someone's natural kindness, then she could probably start on blackmail or something. Think of the scandal. Don't you see, Melrose – however sympathetic one might feel for a girl in difficulties, once you start giving her money you're dish'd: you play right into her hands?'

David felt confused. One thing kept nagging at him. The

scars – she had known about his scars. How? Perhaps she had been with Hemsley once, and someone else could be the father. That would make sense. Somehow he found it difficult to believe. Could she be – as Hemsley said – a *tart*?

‘Listen, Melrose. I give you my word I have never spoken to that girl except to order something from her in Ransom’s. That’s all. Now what’s bothering you? Did she say anything else that’s on your mind?’

‘Not . . . really. But if someone gave her some money without . . . sent it in an anonymous letter –’

‘But how could I get fifty pounds out of my father just like that? Anyway, they could probably trace the numbers on the bank notes. Anyway, why should I fork up for *her* stupidity? I mean, she might just as likely ask you for some money. Has she?’

‘No. But . . . couldn’t she get some money from her own family?’

‘She hasn’t got –’ Hemsley checked in mid-sentence. David looked up for the first time. Their glances met. Hemsley’s eyes were defensive and bright.

‘. . . Enough guts to do that, I suppose,’ he said, in a different tone. He cleared his throat and stood up, turning to look at a picture on the wall so that his back was to David.

‘Now, Melrose. I want you to forget every word that little slut told you. She could get you into very serious trouble. If you started repeating any of that stuff, then I’d have to have you up for malicious rumour-spreading. I don’t want to do that. It’s bad luck on you that you ever got involved with her. I don’t blame you at all – it’s not your fault. Even so, you know you shouldn’t have stayed out like that tonight, don’t you? In the circumstances, though, I’m prepared to forget the whole thing, tear up the ticket. You in your turn I expect to forget your side of it. Fair? You give your word on that?’

There seemed no choice.

‘Yes.’

‘Your word of honour? Not a word to *anyone*?’

‘Yes. No.’

‘Shake on it then.’

Heasley held out his hand: David stood up and shook it. Hemsley’s grasp was firm, but his hand was clammy with sweat.

‘One final thing. If that girl gets at you again, anywhere, you’re not to listen. Refuse to stop. Don’t exchange a single word with her. There’s no excuse for you to go into Ransom’s during training, so there’s no reason why you should ever see her, is there?’

‘No.’

‘Understood and agreed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Right. Good night, Melrose. Oh – one final thing. This.’

He pulled the ticket out of his pocket and carefully tore it into small pieces, dropping them one by one into the wastepaper basket.

‘That’s my part of the deal. Now there’s just yours. Right? Good night, Melrose.’

Chapter 4

After lunch the next day, Sunday, Peter Jenkins put his head round David's door and said, 'Coming for a walk?'

'No thanks.'

'Why not?'

'Got work to do.'

'Oh that can wait, can't it, you foul swot?'

'No, well. . . .'

'Oh, come *on*, for Heaven's sake!'

'No. I'm having tea with an aunt before Chapel, so I must get started on it now.'

'Oh, all right, goody goody.' Peter slammed the door in disgust.

An hour later, at 3.15, David slipped out of the house door. He looked at the yew-bush as he passed and wondered – could he have dreamed the whole incident? It was almost too hard to believe in daylight. He set out along the road in the opposite direction to the school, checking at intervals to see if anyone was following. He did not think anyone had seen him: no one was behind him as he turned the corner. Once round it, he broke into a run until he came to the Jolly Farmer, where the lane led off to the canal. In the lane he slowed down to a quick walk.

When he had eventually got to sleep the night before, after turning over and over in his mind what Hemsley and the girl had said, he had firmly resolved to stand by his promise to Hemsley. Hemsley must be right: he was mad ever to have doubted it. The girl was obviously an unscrupulous little slut. Hemsley might have met her once by chance – on a walk perhaps – and she had invented the whole story, just as Hemsley had said. She was a tart, that's what he'd said. *Tart* – it was a satisfying word: it made him feel grown-up to use it and know what it meant.

When he had woken that morning, early, it had not seemed so easy. He lay and stared at the brightening light through the slit between his curtains. Frankly, he had to admit, he did not know which story to believe. He keenly wished he could believe

both. Instinctively, he was on Hemsley's side – but what about the scars? And Hemsley's slip when he showed he knew she had no family? That made him a liar, for a start. Hadn't he sworn he had never spoken to her, except in Ransom's? How could he have known about her family then? Someone could have told him perhaps. But it was an odd piece of information for Hemsley to have.

Then he decided there was only one thing to be done. He must see the girl, in spite of his promise to Hemsley, tell her what Hemsley had said, explain to her there was no point in going on trying to get money out of him. In this way he could help not only Hemsley, but the girl as well. After all, she would probably get into even worse trouble if she carried on like that. Certainly she would get sacked from Ransom's, and then she'd have even less money. And her foster-parents would probably find out about the baby. . . .

He reached the end of the lane and crossed the bridge to the towpath on the other side. No one was in sight.

He looked at his watch. It said 3.28. In front of him, on the slope that rose to Elliman's Wood, the bracken grew tall and thick. A maze of paths wound through it. That must be where she meant.

He looked back down the lane. No one coming. It was 3.34 now. She had said the bridge, hadn't she? He thought back. Perhaps she had forgotten? Or never meant to come in the first place? Hemsley must be right after all. Of course he was right. . . .

'David.' The voice called softly from the direction of the bracken. He jumped at his name.

'I'm here.'

A hand waving a headscarf appeared over the bracken fifty feet away and fell quickly out of sight. With another quick backward glance he ran towards the hand.

She was sitting on a mackintosh in a small round clearing in a thick clump of bracken.

'Thank you for coming. I thought you would,' she said, smiling. 'Here.' She patted the mackintosh. 'Sit down beside me.'

'No thanks. I'll stand.'

'Someone might see your head over the bracken.'

'OK.' Reluctantly he knelt down on the farthest corner of the mackintosh.

'Do you think I'm infectious or something?' she giggled. David bridled.

'I'm only joking. Did you get into trouble last night? Being late, I mean?'

'He saw us talking. Out of his window.'

'How do you know?' the voice was anxious.

'He told me.'

'What did he say?'

'Oh, lots of things.'

She put one hand on his knee and leant forward. He examined her face closely. Appealing blue eyes, sharply pointed nose, mouth slightly open. She wore lipstick now, unlike the day he had seen her in Ransom's. It looked . . . yes, a *nice* face. Could a *tart* have a nice face?

'Tell me what he said, David. Tell me everything.'

He had no intention of doing that. So he censored his conversation with Hemsley as he went along.

'He said the baby wasn't his and he couldn't give you any money even if he wanted to because he couldn't get it from his father. He said he's never spoken to you except in Ransom's.'

He paused. Then:

'Please. Can't you get the money from someone else?'

'But who, David? *Who?*' She squeezed his knee.

'Well . . . one of the . . . others.'

'The *others*? David, what do you mean?'

'The other . . . men.'

'David, there aren't any other men. I told you last night. I've never *been* with any other man. It's true, it's true. What did he say, then?'

'He said . . . you were a *tart*.' David gave the word all the venom Hemsley had given it. She stared, then buried her face in her hands.

'He said . . . you were a tart and you wanted to blackmail him and get money out of him because he was a lord and you knew he had a rich father, and the baby was someone else's and he would be a sucker if he played into your hands. **Because you were a TART.**'

Her head started jerking. She still kept her hands up to her face. He felt sorry, guilty – yet he felt something else, too. A kind of sense of power. He was almost pleased she was crying.

Then she took her hands away from her face. It was the first time he had seen someone older than himself in tears. Immediately compassion swept through him. There were black streaks under her eyes that ran down her cheeks and blotched the powder. A tear ran down the top of her nose and landed in her lap. She looked pathetic, vulnerable, crushed.

‘I’m sorry. Sorry I made you cry.’ He spoke as sincerely as he dared without starting to cry himself. She was biting her lower lip.

‘Did he really say all that? All you said just now? Those very words?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can someone change like that, into a completely different person? The silly thing is, I still love him. You think I’m silly, don’t you?’

‘No,’ he said, gallantly yet half-heartedly.

‘Well, I am. But I’ve made up my mind. I’m not bringing this baby into the world just to be taken away from me and sent to a home. It’s not fair. And I’m not going to let down my foster-parents – they’ve been too good to me. No, I’ve made up my mind what I’m going to do. I’m going to write him one more letter and tell him. If he still won’t see me, or try to help, or even give a few pounds now and send more in a few months’ time – he’s leaving this term, isn’t he? – then . . . I’ve made up my mind. It’s the only way.’

Sniffs punctuated her phrases. David was only half-listening. He was thinking of getting back in time for evening Chapel.

He said, ‘Look, I’m sorry, I’ll have to go now, otherwise I’ll be late for Chapel.’

She smiled.

‘Yes, David, you go. I mustn’t make you late a second time, must I? Thank you for being such a sweet boy and coming this afternoon.’

She leant forward, put a hand on each of his cheeks and kissed his forehead. He stood up quickly, embarrassed.

‘Forget all about me,’ she said, smiling at his awkwardness.

‘Forget you ever met me. Just remember one thing – you’ve been a great help to a girl who’s only got herself to blame. Will you remember that, David?’

He reached impulsively into his inside breast-pocket for his wallet. He fumbled in one of the flaps and pulled out a crumpled wad of paper.

‘I’m sorry – it’s all I’ve got. But here. It’s my savings.’

He threw the wad into her lap. He did not stop running till he was almost at the turning into Squires-Birch’s.

In the bracken clearing she unfolded the grubby wad. Two pound notes and one ten-shilling note. She squeezed them into a ball, put her hands and the notes up to her face. The tears rolled out between her fingers.

Ten days before the end of term, Peter Jenkins said to David as they were leaving the lavatories after breakfast, ‘Did you see about that waitress at Ransom’s in the paper?’

‘No. What? Which waitress?’

‘That little blonde one who used to bring the ice-cream sodas, you know – Marilyn.’

‘What about her?’

‘Found in the canal.’

‘How? When?’

‘Yesterday. Dead.’

David found it low down in the right-hand middle page of the *Daily Express*. The story ran:

‘Marilyn Steen, 16, waitress at Glazebrook School shop, was found last night dead in the canal near the famous Yorkshire public school. It is thought she must have slipped from the muddy towpath. Police stated that foul play was not suspected. Mr George Flood, verger of St Mary’s, Glazebrook, and the girl’s foster-father for the last eleven years, said, “She had never learnt to swim. My wife and I are heart-broken. Marilyn was like a daughter to us.”’

Chapter 5

‘Please, sir, could I talk to you a minute.’ •

David addressed the head of Aubrey Squires-Birch, MA, as – according to rigid ritual – it peered round his door at exactly 9.22 p.m. and said squeakily ‘Everything all right, Melrose? Good. Good night,’ without ever giving a chance of an answer.

Boys did not usually ask Aubrey Squires-Birch if they ‘could talk’ to him: he was not the sort of man for that. So there was some surprise in his face as he closed the door.

‘Yes, of course. What is it? In some kind of trouble? Hexameters getting mixed up with pentameters?’ The housemaster smirked.

‘No, sir. It’s not about work. It’s this.’

He held up the *Daily Express* and pointed to the paragraph. Squires-Birch removed his half-lensed glasses from their case and put them on his nose with that deliberateness beloved of schoolmasters. He took the newspaper as if it was some dead and decaying animal, his forehead puckering into two deep vertical lines above his nose as he deciphered the small print.

‘Yes, I heard about that this morning from another master. It wasn’t reported in my own newspaper – not exactly of interest to *Times* readers, I suppose. Poor girl. It is tragic, most upsetting. But how particularly does it affect you, Melrose? I suppose you must have been attended to by the girl, in Ransom’s, of course. But apart from that . . . ?’

David blurted out his story. He started with the incident of the letter that first Saturday afternoon and ended with the rendezvous by the canal. Everything Hemsley had said, everything the girl had said – except one thing: her identification of Hemsley’s scars. He could not bring himself to tell Squitters that.

That morning, as he finished reading that cold little paragraph in the paper, he had decided he must tell Squitters the whole story, whatever the consequences. He *had* to have his conscience put at rest, and Squitters – by position rather than personality – was the only person who could do that. He had considered going to Dog-Collar Dixon, his Divinity master: Dog-Collar had said

at the beginning of term that anyone could always bring him any special personal problems – ‘That’s what I’m there for, remember?’ – and he would do all he could to help. But no – better go to Squitters because Dog-Collar would probably see Squitters in the end anyway, and the less people involved the better.

His promise to Hemsley: he had given his word of honour. But surely a death made that null and void? He couldn’t imagine her dead somehow. It was the first time anyone had died whom he had known and spoken to and touched. It seemed such a short time ago that she had put a hand on each side of his face and said ‘Forget all about me.’ How could he ever – now?

‘Well, it’s a sad little tale, is it not, Melrose,’ said Squitters coldly. ‘Just let me ask you one thing first – this is true in every detail? You are not lapsing into the realms of speculation, assumption or simply plain day-dreams, are you?’

Breathlessly he answered, ‘No, sir.’

‘You are sure?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Now – have you told anyone else this story?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Another boy, your parents, anybody else at all?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Certain?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Good. Well, Melrose, this is obviously a very worrying situation for you. I quite understand why you should want to inform me. There is no great point now in mentioning the fact that, if you had believed the girl’s story, you should have come and confided in me some time ago, should you not, Melrose? After all, she was making a very serious accusation against the captain of my house. And the most efficient way to deal with such an accusation is to investigate the truth of it quietly, discreetly and as early as possible, to prevent anyone’s reputation being unjustly and irreparably tarnished later. Anyway, let us not flounder in the realms of past hypothesis and revert to present facts. Fact one, Melrose, whether one likes it or not, is that the poor girl is no more. Fact two, Melrose, is that nothing you nor I, nor indeed the captain of the house, can do will resurrect her.

Now I want you to bear those two facts in the forefront of your mind. Those two facts alone. Everything else is irrelevant. In the meantime you will on no account impart a word of this story to a single other person. Your lips must be sealed. "The rest is silence," eh? Hamlet. You're doing Hamlet this term, aren't you? Umm . . . anyway, you did exceptionally well to keep this matter confidential up till now, and I rely on you implicitly to continue that policy. Much is at stake here. Is that understood?'

They had all said that – Hemsley, the girl, now Squitters. Don't tell anyone else. Perhaps he *should* have told Squitters right at the beginning. Then why should he have done? It was none of his business. Hemsley could have been right: she could have been a tart. And then what a fool he'd have made of himself. And how disloyal to Hemsley.

But how could he know she was going to *die*?

He had almost gabbled out his story to Squitters, his lungs catching over some of the words. Squitters had not looked at him once. And when Squitters had started talking, the thin scratchy voice sounded so unmoved, so disinterested. There was almost, it seemed to David as the housemaster talked, a note of malevolent pleasure in his voice. Except in the last few sentences. The order to keep silent was harsh, definite; the bright little eyes gleamed at him unblinking over the half-lenses as the housemaster suddenly stopped his hunched shuffling to-and-fro in front of the fireplace and turned to face him.

'Is that understood, Melrose?' he repeated.

'Yes, sir . . . what, sir, are you going to do about it, sir?'

'The choice for the first piece of investigation is not large, Melrose. I shall clearly have to discuss the matter with the house captain, will I not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I will decide nothing until then. I will speak to you again tomorrow evening, if not before then. Now it's very late and I have some correcting to do. So I bid you good night, Melrose. Just remember your Hamlet – "The rest is silence".'

'Come in and sit down, Melrose.'

David had been summoned to his housemaster's study after Prayers. His hand was trembling as he knocked on the door.

He went over to one of the large leather armchairs by the fireplace. The arm was cold to his touch and the chair squeaked as he sat down. Squitters was standing by the large dark-brown leather-topped desk, pipe in one hand, turning over pages of essays with the other.

After some minutes Squitters said, 'Now - to business.' He shuffled across the room and sat down opposite David in the other armchair. A piece of horse-hair oozed out of a tear in the end of one arm.

'Now, Melrose. I have pursued some investigations as a result of our talk last night. I have spoken to the captain of the house, and I have made a few discreet inquiries elsewhere. I will now tell you the result of those inquiries. First, the girl was - as you said - in a pregnant condition. Secondly, it looks as though her unfortunate death could indeed have been suicide. Thirdly, I am entirely satisfied with the captain of the house's assurances that at no time had he seen or spoken to the girl outside Ransom's, and then only in the course of ordering some food or drink. Fourthly, being in an unbalanced mental condition owing to her state of pregnancy, the girl was trying to obtain money from any likely source: this is a well-known course of action by women in this condition, I may say, Melrose.

'Now let me do a piece of reconstruction for you. Then we can lay your mind at rest about this whole unfortunate episode. When certain girls reach the age of adolescence, Melrose, especially those who have had upset homes, or lost their parents as this girl had done, they try to compensate for this lack of stability or parental affection. This urge for compensation is usually vented in one particular sphere of emotion - sexual relations. Perhaps the kindest thing one can say about such girls is that they fully understand neither the immorality of what they are doing, nor the risks involved. They throw self-control and restraint to the winds. First one young man, then another, then another. It is a desperate pursuit: they become like animals, starved animals in the snow who will stop at nothing to fill their bellies. Yet every time they clutch out for their quarry, it turns into a will-o'-the-wisp that dances tauntingly out of their grasp. So the vicious circle starts again.'

Squitters' eyes were burning bright in a way David had never

seen before. His hands were splayed out on each arm of his chair, small slug's-belly-white hands with a few long black hairs on the backs. His pipe was tucked under the left fore-finger and thumb. His nails were long and dirty. He was almost out of breath from the passion he had put into his speech. When he spoke again, the reedy voice was quieter.

'Such a girl was this. Take this incident now as a warning: learn from it and it will stand you in good stead all your life. I do not blame you for believing all the girl told you. But when a woman is faced by the accumulated results of her own folly and profligacy, there is no depth of subterfuge to which she will not sink, no Machiavellian scheme she will not try, in order to extricate herself. This girl was in such a corner: she was faced with the prospect of being turned out of her home by her foster-parents. The money she told you she needed, Melrose, was not for the purposes she described. She never intended to have the baby at all: she wanted the money *to pay to have it illegally removed* by some doctor of ill repute she had no doubt made it her business to find. She probably tried the young men she had consorted with – to no avail. In her desperation she saw what she thought was an easy way out: attempted blackmail. Blackmail of an innocent boy. It is easy to see why she chose the captain of this house. He is, after all, a well-known figure in the School. The fact, too, that he is titled might lead her to suppose he would do anything she asked in order to avoid a scandal. There she erred. Hemsley, of course, should have come and told me the moment he received her begging letter – the one you delivered, Melrose – and I told him so. But I fully accept his assertion that he preferred to dismiss the letter either as some kind of thoroughly bad-taste "joke" perpetrated by a prankster friend, or as an act of folly by a stupid young girl. He did not, quite understandably, want to get anyone into trouble, which would have been the inevitable outcome if he had referred the matter of the letter to me, whether it was penned by prankster or girl. •

'So now, Melrose, my recommendation to you is this: dismiss the whole episode from your mind, remembering but one lesson from it: never trust a woman just because she has a not altogether displeasing face. Believe logic, believe facts, but never

believe emotion, never believe sentiment. Facts, Melrose, facts – facts and facts alone, neither supposition, nor wishful thinking, nor sympathy, nor hearsay. Facts constitute evidence, nothing else.'

David dared not interrupt the tense speech. He sat motionless, feeling uncomfortably small in the vast armchair, while a mounting distrust throbbed inside him. It couldn't have been like that, he knew it, he knew it. He said in a quavery voice:

'But, sir, how did she know about the scars?'

Squitters stopped filling his pipe from a ragged old tobacco pouch he had pulled out of his pocket.

'Scars? What scars?' He looked up puzzled and hostile.

'Hemsley's scars, sir.'

'What scars? What do you mean, Melrose?'

'Sir, I didn't tell you this before but she told me she'd seen Hemsley's scars, sir. He has two scars, sir – one appendix one and another on the other side. She knew about them, sir.'

Squires-Birch stared at David for a full ten seconds. David stared back mesmerized. Then the housemaster dropped his eyes, put his pipe in his mouth, lit a match. Smoke hid his eyes. Gurgles of residual spit came from the pipe bowl. He shook out the match. When the smoke cleared, he was staring hard at David again.

'Melrose, look here. I am not interested in how a dead waitress at Ransom's knew that the captain of this house bears scars on his body. Without pursuing the matter deeply, I can think of any number of methods by which she could have learnt this. *Are you telling the truth, Melrose?*'

'Yes, sir, I am.'

Squires-Birch leaned back and continued as if he had neither asked the question nor heard the answer.

'At a guess, I would say any number of people in this school know that Hemsley spent two successive Christmas holidays in hospital, one having his appendix removed and one undergoing an operation for hernia. On both occasions there was some question of whether he would be able to play for the School the next term. I would say that his operations were what might be called, in the circumstances of his athletic fame and skill, a matter of common knowledge and common concern.'

‘Anyway, Melrose, this is an irrelevance. I thought I had explained how a situation like this can develop with a girl such as this. You cannot have absorbed what I said – a woman in this position will stop at nothing. Her profession to be acquainted with Hemsley or . . . intimately enough to know about the scars was a scurrilous underhand attempt to convince you of the truth of her story. Can you not see the unprincipled, deceitful way in which her mind was working?’

David did not answer. A blob of spit dripped from the end of Squitters’ pipe on to the carpet.

‘Now listen carefully. It seems to me almost as if you want to believe all that girl’s lies, as if you want to believe her in preference to the captain of your house, your fag-master, someone with the same background and attitude of life as yourself. Where is your loyalty, Melrose? Do you *want* to involve the greatest athlete this house has ever produced in a tawdry scandal in the last weeks of his schooldays? Do you *want* an exceptional record in this school to be tarnished by the slanderous allegations of some promiscuous guilt-ridden little waitress – now dead by her own hand? Do you not know what would happen if, for instance, somehow the popular Press became involved in this? Can you not imagine the scandal it would bring upon this house, upon the School, and Hemsley’s family? Hemsley’s father, you may know, has a prominent post in the Royal Household: he is also a Senior Governor of this school. Can you not imagine the anguish and embarrassment the propagation of this girl’s lies would cause? The delight with which the headline-writers would hurl their cheap, sensational poison-darts?’

He paused.

‘I told you last night to remember two things: the girl is dead, and nothing can bring her back. If out of some boyish feeling of chivalry, Melrose – which I understand in someone of your age – you are concerned about the apportioning of blame for her death, just consider your own role in this. You were the only person to whom we know she told her plans for suicide. You told me last night that, when you left her by the canal, she said she was going to “take the only way out”, didn’t you? “To end it all”, or some such phrase you used. *Didn’t you?*’

‘Yes, sir.’

'Well, what do you think she meant by that except that she was going to take her own life? What else could she have meant, Melrose? *Eh?*'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Very good. Now when someone has been told by another person that that person intends to kill himself, that someone could be placed in a very dangerous position if they did not report the professed intention to a responsible third party, with a view to preventing it. Do you see that, Melrose?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now I am prepared to overlook this facet of the matter because, as I said, the girl is dead and neither she nor anyone else will be served well by raking about in the unsavoury garbage of events that led up to her suicide, however unfortunate and avoidable those events now may seem. Do you see?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I want you to leave my study now and dismiss the whole matter from your mind. Every worry, every feeling of guilt you may have, purge it from your mind. Merely store the lessons you have learnt for future reference: they might prevent you from making the same mistake twice. Because next time, Melrose, you might not emerge unscathed. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

The housemaster shuffled towards the door.

'Right. That's that. Er . . . getting on satisfactorily otherwise, Melrose? Mastering your Thucydides?'

Few smells are as distinctive as that of several hundred school-boys crammed together in a small space. Luckily for them, the boys and the masters are used to it: only visitors suffer.

The visitors were indeed suffering that Saturday night in the Memorial Hall. They suffered at every School Concert, as much from the music as from the smell. For musical efficiency and creativity were not in great demand at Glazebrook. The School Concert, being at the end of each term, was treated as an excuse for a communal laugh and letting-off-steam rather than as a chance to listen to music. Not that the music was really worth listening to.

Except the *Vale*. That was worth listening to. It was the high

spot of the Concert, just before four hundred voices – boys, masters, assorted parents and old boys – burst into the hearty, blimpish strains of the *Carmen* and bellowed themselves hoarse – in Latin.

The *Vale* fitted perfectly into the unspoken brief for all singers and musicians at the Concert: to make as loud and as ghastly a noise as possible without overstepping the mark and getting into trouble – as Hilton-Maxton Major had done when he had blown a series of decidedly rectal noises on his trombone during the National Anthem.

But in the *Vale* there was no mark to overstep. This was a time-honoured ritual in which the three most illustrious leavers marched up the aisle in single file, lined up on the stage and each sang – or attempted to sing – one verse of a song written specially for this occasion by some Old Glazebrookian called Barrington-Hornsby, who had a gift for lyrical sentimentality and the melodic cliché that would be the envy of Tin Pan Alley. As qualification for illustriousness at Glazebrook normally depended on brawn rather than on any other more aesthetic quality, the actual notes of Mr Barrington-Hornsby's original score were rarely given a hearing. In fact, a correct note – though how anyone knew what a correct note was is a mystery – was greeted by jeers and cat-calls from the auditorium; while a completely wrong note, bel-lowed *fortissimo*, aroused a paean of cheers.

The last 'musical' item – a string-quartet playing Bach – had finished to a few derisory hurrahs. Conversation buzzed and heads turned round to look at the door through which the three great men would stride, arms swinging like recruit Guardsmen.

Yes – there they come. The cheer rose from the back rows, swelled to a mighty roar as the three came down the aisle between the rows of wooden chairs. Hands slapped their backs as they passed, shoes drummed on the floor, dust rose in clouds.

They each took a music-sheet from the Precentor, lined up on front of the stage, grinning self-consciously down at the audience. The cheers died as the Precentor raised his baton, tapped the rostrum, and led the orchestra into the introductory bars.

David Melrose scarcely heard the first two verses or the applause that greeted them. His eyes were on the right-hand member of

the three, the last to come down the aisle, in the position reserved for the most illustrious leaver of all.

Hemsley.

Since his talk with Squires-Birch, David had deliberately avoided Hemsley. And, it seemed, Hemsley had deliberately avoided him. He had still done his fag's duties, but Hemsley never appeared between supper and Prayers, when it was the custom for fags to tidy up their fagmasters' rooms and turn down their beds.

This was the first time he had dared look at Hemsley since he had blurted out his story to Squires-Birch. Now Hemsley would not see him, buried in the middle some five rows from the front, so he stared hard at that handsome arrogant face, mane of black hair above it, pointed chin, wide straight mouth, now up at one side in a confident grin that showed a flashy row of teeth.

The second verse had been sung. Now it was Hemsley's turn. The orchestra started the introduction but the cheers drowned it. The tom-tom of feet started again, pounding, pounding. David sat silent, still, staring at Hemsley's face, snatches of remembered conversation crackling through his head like a nightmare-sequence in a film. The mind-recorded voices of the girl, of Squitters, of Hemsley, all jumbled up in a nattering cacophony over the solid wall of sound all round him. His own voice tried to drown them.

'She wasn't . . . you lied . . . she wasn't a tart . . . you lied . . . she wasn't a tart . . . you lied.'

The cheering and floor-thumping was so deafening that David did not realize he was talking out loud. Neither he nor anyone else could have heard his voice, so great was the din. Suddenly the Precentor, who had been facing the orchestra with both arms raised ready for the noise to die down, spun round sharply and lashed the air once with his baton. His face threw out such fury that the noise stopped, as if a radio blaring at maximum volume had suddenly been disconnected.

' . . . YOU LIED. . . '

David had not been watching the Precentor. The words shattered the second of silence like two caps in a toy-pistol. Then the orchestra started.

The boys round David heard the two words. Some turned round in surprise, then turned back to watch Hemsley.

Hemsley heard it too. He looked abruptly towards the source of the sound. He saw David. The nonchalant grin froze into a mask. There was guilt there, and fear. The Precentor was looking at Hemsley, waiting for him to start singing. Hemsley shook his head once, like a partially stunned boxer. Back came the nonchalant grin. He burst into a raucous bass.

As he bellowed the final top note, or something near it, there was a thunderclap of cheering. He moved towards the steps in the centre of the stage to lead the other two back down the aisle. But, instead of following behind in single file, they hoisted him on their shoulders, carrying him down the steps and along the aisle while the boys in the nearest chairs clambered to slap him on the back.

‘You must be sorry to be losing your dashing young sprig of nobility,’ the Headmaster shouted in Aubrey Squires-Birch’s ear.

‘Yes,’ came the answer, strident and falsetto over the cheers. ‘The finest house captain I ever had.’

Chapter 6

After the incident with Mr Austin, David Melrose spent more and more of the holidays in Dorset with his grandparents, his father's parents, who lived in a large old country-house called Combe Manor.

The Melrose family had lived at Combe for several centuries, as David's father never ceased to remind him, and, according to his father, every path and tree and bridge on the estate had some deep historical significance.

'The oak-tree stump by the weir, you mean, Grandpa?' David said one day when his grandfather was describing where he had seen an otter's tracks. 'That's where Richard Cocur-de-Lion forded the river, wasn't it?'

His grandfather chuckled: 'I know who told you that - your father, wasn't it? Don't believe a word he says. Fellow gets the most extraordinary ideas about things he thinks went on here in the past. Makes them up himself, if you ask me. Don't believe a word he says. Richard Lionheart never came within five hundred miles of here. Nor did Wat Tyler, Oliver Cromwell, or Nell Gwyn for that matter. Extraordinary idea of history the fellow gets.' The old man chuckled to himself the whole way back to the house.

David saw more and more of his father the longer he spent at Combe. Their relationship, however, was never as father and son. It was more as between an elder and younger brother. His father was still in the Navy, a Commander, working in a staff job at the Admiralty. He had been on the Staff ever since 1944 when he had been badly wounded in a destroyer in the North Sea.

'What do you do in the Admiralty, Father?' David sometimes asked.

'Can't discuss it, my dear fellow. Hush-hush stuff. Spies and that sort of thing.'

'You send out spies, you mean?'

'Can't discuss it, my dear fellow. Top secret.'•

His father rarely mentioned his mother - usually twice each

holidays, in fact. The first time David saw him he would say 'How's your mother?'; and as they said goodbye at the end of the holidays, 'My regards to your mother.' His mother always had the impression that his father continually talked about her. David never dared disillusion her.

His father lived in a flat in London in Clarges Street, yet David never saw him except at Combe. Their relationship had developed naturally in this way – neither of them ever mentioning meeting in London, even when David was passing through on his way to and from Glazebrook – and that was the way David preferred it. His father, for him, was part of Combe – he could not really imagine him anywhere else.

David's relationship with his mother had been uneasy and jagged ever since the Austin incident. They could hardly converse without ending up in a violent argument in which David would lose his temper and say things far more hurtful and vicious than he meant. He did not actually dislike his mother, he kept thinking; it was simply that he could never quite quell an impulse to annoy her, disobey her, defy her. He felt *uncomfortable* with her, that was it: he could not look her in the eye for more than a second without wanting to turn away.

As he came to spend more and more time at Combe, their relationship disintegrated even further.

Her undoubted charm meant that her tall figure was always surrounded by friends. She had the gregarious habits of one bred in Mayfair grill rooms. It was all the more surprising as she had been born and had spent much of her life on lonely Kenya estates; a first marriage to a drunken farmer had ended with his death in a shooting accident and her escape to England.

This almost forced gregariousness particularly grated on David. He was deliberately insolent to her friends – merely because they *were* her friends. Most of her wide circle were married. And he felt at his most insolent when her married friends came without their wives.

At first, he would spend the middle fortnight of the holidays at Combe and the remainder at Sunningdale with his mother. The last days of the holidays were always the worst of all. After the freedom and fun of Combe, where he was treated like a grown-up by his grandparents and like a brother by his father,

the claustrophobia of his mother's house and her enveloping attentions made him long to get back to Glazebrook. Yet, the moment he was back in his room at school he would look at the photograph of her in the frame by his bed and hate himself for all the things he had said and done to hurt her. Somehow, though, he could never bring himself to apologize, even in a letter – and when he wrote to her he was deliberately cold and distant, writing dull reports of football or cricket matches and telling her nothing remotely personal.

One Christmas holidays when he was sixteen, the situation came to a head. He was due to go to Combe immediately after Christmas for a fortnight, and then spend the last week with his mother. He was lying in the bath on the morning he was to leave, happy at the thought of being in his beloved Combe in a few hours.

He must have forgotten to lock the bathroom door, because his mother came in, shut the door and sat down on the edge of the bath. He sat up in the bath with sudden anger and began soaping his face so he would not have to look at her.

‘Need any help with your packing, darling?’

‘No thanks,’ through his soapy hands.

‘Are you sure – no last minute mending of socks, things like that?’

‘No thanks.’

‘Mind if I sit and talk to you? I won’t see you for such ages. I know you love being there but I do miss you, darling.’

David gurgled some indistinguishable word behind his hands.

He was furious. How dare she barge into his bathroom like that? He was always careful to lock the door: he hated the idea of her seeing him in the bath. She often tried the bathroom door-handle when he was in there.

‘It’s all right. I just wanted to go to the loo but I can wait,’ she would say. But this time. . . . Even when he was undressing for bed, he disliked the way she sat on his bed, talking. He always pointedly turned his back on her.

She was saying, ‘Do give them *all* my love up there, won’t you. Don’t forget to go and see Mrs Chancellor in the stables – she always used to have a new bag of toffees ready for you when I took you round to see her in your pram. And Mrs Cave at the

Dairy – she used to let you go and find the eggs in the hay, remember, darling? Who else is going to be there, d'you know?'

'Dunno at all.' He soaped more furiously. She chattered on, but David was not listening. He was wondering how to get her out of the bathroom before he had to get out of the bath. He sat forward in the soapy water, arms across his knees, staring at the overflow hole, saying 'Umm' disinterestedly after each remark.

'Come on now, hurry up, darling, you don't want to miss your train.'

She leaned down and pulled the plug-chain, throwing it over the end of the bath. She sat there, looking at him. He could feel the water level sinking.

'Can you please pass me a towel?'

She stood up, still talking about all the people to whom she wanted him to pass on messages at Combe – she had not been there since the war, since the divorce, but she still wrote to the wives of certain estate employees (why, David could never understand, and it irritated him) – picked the towel off the hot rail, and held it open for him to step into. There was nothing else for it – he would have to stand up.

'... and *do* go and see Mrs Curleigh at the lodge. Good heavens, you're getting hairy, darling. And you're *enormous*: you're bigger than your father already.'

He pulled the towel round him, feeling her intent inspection of his naked body with a mixture of fury, contempt, and embarrassment. She followed him into his bedroom and stayed while he dressed, talking without interruption. David did not say a word. He had made up his mind – rather she made up his mind for him.

'Why are you packing all those things, darling? You won't need all those, will you? Your smart grey suit? All your ties? Your books?'

'I might. Never know,' he grunted.

'You've never taken them before.'

He packed into his two trunks almost everything he owned.

'Couldn't I stay on till the 22nd, Granny? Please?'

'Well, of course, we'd love to have you. But isn't your mother

expectin' you back on the 15th? You wouldn't see her at all if you stayed till the 22nd, would you?'

'Yes. In London on the way up.'

'But that's not much time. Wouldn't she be hurt if you didn't go earlier?'

'No, of course not, Granny.'

His grandmother was knitting beside the log-fire in the sitting-room in her special armchair. Knitting, as always. There was a deep tranquillity in the rhythmic click-click of her needles. She looked at David over the black spectacles perched on the end of her nose. He was sitting cross-legged on the hearthrug at her feet, trying to solve the remaining clues of the *Times* crossword.

'Well, I mean - oh, you are so *difficult*, David. You never stick to your plans. Always chopping and changing. You stayed on two extra days last holidays, pretending you had a chill.' The tone of her voice was mock-serious, but there was a twinkle in the eyes over the spectacles. 'Well, what can we say to her so she won't be hurt?'

'Oh, anything. Say Father's got some more leave. Anything.'

'Now we can't just tell a pack of lies. I won't have it.'

'All right, Granny. Just tell her the truth. Say I'd rather be here with you than there with her.'

'You're *not* to talk like that, David. It's very disloyal. I won't have it.'

'Well, you said you wouldn't tell a lie, Granny.'

'Oh, you are so *difficult*. You'll have to ask Grandpa. If he says you can stay, it's all right. I won't decide on my own. I've done that anagram by the way. Write it in - "Prospectus".'

A few minutes later his grandfather came into the room, walking slowly, with short little strides. His back was as straight as a ramrod.

'Grandpa - ?'

His grandmother chipped in: 'He wants to stay till the 22nd. Do you think he can?'

'Of course, of course. Stay as long as he likes. Covey of partridges on the lawn.'

'There you are, Granny. It's all fixed.'

'Well, what are we going to tell your mother? What can we tell Cynthia?'

'Cynthia? Who's Cynthia? Oh Cynthia,' said his grandfather. 'Tell her what?'

'What shall we tell her about David staying on?'

'Tell her he's staying till the 22nd. No need to go into a long rigmarole.'

'Why is he stayin', though?'

'Why? Fellow probably wants to. Just tell her he wants to stay till the 22nd. All right by us. Does Bradwood know?'

(Bradwood had been the butler at Combe for thirty years and ran everything and everyone in the house, both staff and family alike.)

'As long as you tell Bradwood in good time, no problem. Partridges on the lawn: means cold weather's coming.'

His grandfather plumped down in an armchair and began filling his pipe.

'There you are, Granny. You'll ring her up and tell her, won't you?'

'Me? You know I hate talking on the telephone.'

'Oh, please.'

'Why can't you? She's your mother, after all.'

'It would come so much better from you.'

'All right. After lunch, then. Here - give me the crossword a minute.'

'Granny, there's one other thing.'

'What?'

'Would it be all right if Hector stayed here during the term?'

'Hector? That scruffy, dirty little mongrel? You know I won't have dogs in the house. What *do* you mean? Why? I thought you always liked takin' him down with you. To have at home.'

'I thought he'd be so much happier here. At home he's always getting out on the road and there's cars passing the whole time. Mrs Chancellor said she'd love to go on keeping him in the stables. He's no trouble. He feeds with all the other dogs.'

'Mrs Chancellor doesn't want the bother of someone else's dog, surely. She's got her children to look after.'

'I promise you, Granny. She loves Hector and she always says she hates losing him when I take him back at the end of the holidays.'

She said to his grandfather, 'Now he says he wants to leave Hector here.'

His grandfather looked puzzled.

'Hector? Who's Hector?'

'~~That~~ beastly little dog.'

'Oh, Hector. Good little animal, that. Sporting blood. What's wrong with it?'

'He wants to leave it here.'

'Good idea. Much better off here. Plenty of exercise. Mrs Chancellor'll look after him. Nice lady, nice lady.'

David caught his grandmother's eye. She was trying not to smile.

'Here - fill in two down,' she said, handing him the crossword.

'"Achilles". You should have got that.'

He felt very happy as he wrote in the letters. . . .

After lunch he reminded her of her promise to telephone his mother.

'All right now. Don't pester me,' she said.

A few minutes later, without saying where she was going, she left the sitting-room. David tiptoed after her. The telephone was in a tiny room off the hall in which coats were hung and umbrellas stacked. The temperature in the room was usually below zero: David suspected this was a deliberate piece of policy to discourage use of the telephone.

His grandfather particularly hated the telephone. 'Infernal contraption,' he would puff through his moustache every time it rang. If anyone talked for more than exactly one and a half minutes, he would start bellowing from his armchair in the sitting-room, which was a good thirty yards from the telephone, '*Get off that damned instrument*. What can they have to talk about ~~all~~ this time? Damned gossip. *Get off that infernal thing*.'

He himself would never touch the instrument except on New Year's Day to wish any absent members of his family a Happy New Year.

David reached the hall. The telephone-room door was slightly open. He could hear his grandmother's particular falsetto 'telephone' voice:

'Cynthia, is that you? Hullo, how are you? . . . Yes, it's pretty cold down here, too. . . . Oh, he's very well. . . . No, not being a

nuisance at all. Look, I wondered, *we* wondered, if it would be all right if he stayed a bit longer than the 15th. His father may be comin' up for that week-end and I know he'd like David to stay for that, if you agree. . . . Are you sure? . . . Well, we thought the 22nd. . . . Are you sure that's all right? It doesn't *leave* you much time to see him before he goes back to school but. . . . No, we just hope he won't get frightfully bored here with just us – I'm sure he'd have much more fun with you: he didn't seem too keen to stay on really. . . . No, he's gone out somewhere at the moment but I'll pass it on to him. . . .'

'*Get off that infernal thing.*' His grandfather's voice came rolling down the passage and crashed into the hall like a tidal wave.

'Look, I must go now. I'm being called. . . . Yes, he's quite well, thank you – a little trouble with gout, but nothing very bad. . . .'

'*Get off that damned thing.*'

'Yes . . . yes . . . thank you so much, Cynthia. Goodbye.'

David ran back into the sitting-room.

'She off that thing yet? What can she be talking about? Who's she talking to, anyway?'

'My mother, Grandpa.'

'That explains it. Damned woman always talked too much.'

'How did you know Granny was on the telephone? She never said.'

'Damned bell goes ping in here every time you pick the thing up. Infernal contraption.'

His grandmother came into the room.

'You're not to shout so loud. You'll strain your heart. It's very bad for you. I've told you before.'

'Damned instrument.'

'Thank you, Granny,' said David.

She saw the smile on his face.

'David,' she said sharply, 'you must have been listenin'. That's very deceitful of you.'

'Serves you right if you will chatter on that damned contraption,' muttered his grandfather.

David arrived in London by the milk train on the morning of

22nd January. He took a taxi to Thurloe Place, where his mother had stayed the night in a friend's flat.

He rang the bell. Now the moment he dreaded. . . .

'Hello, darling. Did you have a wonderful time? How *were* they all?' She kissed him on the cheek.

He smelt warm bedclothes, face-cream and toothpaste. She was still in her dressing-gown. Her black hair was in curlers.

'Let me help with your luggage, darling.'

'It's all right, thanks. It's not heavy.'

'Only one case? Darling, where's all the other stuff you took? You had two cases when you left. In the left-luggage place?'

'I left it at Combe.'

'Are they going to send it up, then?'

'No. It's to stay there.'

'Stay there? What do you mean? For how long?'

'I don't know. For a bit, anyway.'

'What an odd thing to do, darling. You'll need all your books and things next holidays. Now someone's got all the bother of collecting the stuff from the station. Darling, you are thoughtless sometimes. Anyway, come and have breakfast. I've brought up a new-laid egg for you.'

They went into the kitchen-dining-room: the leaf-table was laid for two.

'Darling, you must be ravenous after that terrible train. Tuck in. Look - I even brought up your special egg-cup.' The face of the Mad Hatter on his egg-cup grinned inanely at him from the table.

She put an egg into a saucepan on the cooker.

'Wasn't it sweet of Virginia to lend us her flat? She's away in Morocco, painting madly. Look: she's even got a . . . Darling, where's Hector? You haven't left him out in the street, have you?'

'No. I didn't bring him.'

'What?'

'Left him at Combe.'

'Why?'

'Because I wanted to. He likes it ~~more~~ there.'

'Who's going to look after him? You know your grandmother's never allowed a dog in the house.'

'Mrs Chancellor,' David said through a mouthful of cornflakes.

'Why should poor Mrs Chancellor have all the bother of looking after Hector when I can perfectly well do it, darling?'

'She asked to keep him. She loves Hector. And he loves her.'

'She'll never be able to take him for lovely long walks like me. She'll never have the time. And what about all his special vitamin tablets and things? They're very expensive – she won't be able to afford them.'

'He doesn't need all those vitamin tablet things you give him. He's perfectly healthy.'

'Nonsense – of *course* he does. You know I love having Hector when you're away. He adores me, too. He'll be miserable. He'll pine away; dogs do.'

'He's very happy. He loves Mrs Chancellor.'

'What am I going to do without a dog all on my own? You know one needs a watchdog.'

'Get a proper one then – an Alsatian or something. One of your own.'

'Don't be silly, darling. I'm going to write to Mrs Chancellor tonight and ask her to put Hector on the train. I'll pick him up from the guard. All he needs is a muzzle and a lead.'

'I want him to stay there.'

'Don't be silly, darling. I need him with me.'

'Whose dog is he, then?'

'He's your dog, of course, darling – in the holidays. In the term he's mine. It's always been like that. Don't you want him there when you get back for the holidays? Now let's stop all this ridiculous argy-bargy. You always come back from Combe like this. Have it too much your own way there, I suppose. I'm writing to Mrs Chancellor tonight. . . .'

David banged his spoon on the table. His mother jumped.

'You will leave Hector at Combe,' he said angrily. 'He is my dog and I want him to stay there. I have told Mrs Chancellor he is to stay with her until I go back.'

'Darling, don't you want him for the beginning of next holidays with me?' She busied herself over the saucepan of boiling water.

'No.'

'Why not?' She stared incredulously.

'Because . . . I am not going to Sunningdale next holidays. I am going straight to Combe. They asked me. Father will be there.'

She had just spooned the egg out of the saucepan. It rolled off the spoon and hit the floor at her feet with a splosh. She did not even look down at the mess.

'You're not coming home at *all* next holidays?'

'No.'

'Why? When will I see you then?'

'On the way to and from Combe.'

'What, a few hours in London, you mean?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because . . . I'd rather be there.'

'You mean, you're calmly telling your own mother you only want to see her two days each holidays, *half* of two days?'

'It's not that. It's just that I'd . . . rather be at Combe.'

'What *do* you mean? I might just as well say I'd rather be at Buckingham Palace. But Buckingham Palace isn't my home. My home is your home, too. Combe is not your home.'

'It is.'

'It is *not* your home, David. It is your grandparents' home. It is not even your father's home. And when your grandfather dies it will be your cousin James's home. I don't know what you're talking about. Combe is *not* your home.'

'Well I want it to be for the moment, anyway. They said I could stay there whenever I liked. Grandpapa said it a hundred times. So did Granny.'

'Of course they *said* it. They're just being kind. They know you love going there and they're old and probably like having a grandson there to amuse them.'

'Well, I'm not going back to Sunningdale, anyway.'

'Look here, you silly ungrateful spoilt little boy.' It was her turn to bang the table now – with the flat of her hand. The cutlery rattled. 'Every time you come back from Combe you're like this. Oh, I know why – I know *why* all right. Because you're waited on hand and foot by servants and you get away with anything you like because you can twist that doddering old couple round your finger.'

‘They’re *not* doddering. They’re –’

‘*Oh* yes. Coming back to a humble little cottage and a mother who has to do all the housework and the cooking and the washing-up is a bit of a come-down for the *great* David Melrose with his highfalutin ideas, isn’t it? *Oh yes. Well, let me tell you something*’ – she hissed the words – ‘If it hadn’t been for that doddering old couple, that pair of sweet old dears who look as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths, *I* wouldn’t *be* living in a small house, doing the housework and the cooking and the washing-up, acting like an unpaid char. They turned my husband against me and now they’re trying to do the same thing with my son. *They’ve* put you against me, haven’t they? Every holidays they’ve been throwing in their innocent little poison darts, rotting me, laughing at me, condemning me in front of my own son, *haven’t* they? Admit it, admit it. That woman, that grandmother of yours – if I lived to be a hundred I’ll never meet a bigger BITCH in. . . .’

David hurled the Mad Hatter egg-cup hard at her head. It missed and shattered on the tiled wall behind. He rushed out of the room, grabbed his suitcase, out into the street. . . .

‘You’re back early, sir, aren’t you?’ said the taxi-driver at Glazebrook Station. ‘Rest of the gentlemen’ll only just mak’ it before ten o’clock this evening, if I know owt. Stealing a day’s march on everyone else, eh? Get some of them mathematical problems worked out in advance, eh? Wish I were back at school. Happiest days of thy life, they say. Dead right, if you ask me. Happiest days of thy life. . . .’

In the first letter to his mother that term he wrote, ‘I’m sorry I threw that egg-cup at you.’

In her first letter to him she wrote, ‘Please forget everything I said at our nightmare breakfast. I’m never at my best in the early morning and I didn’t mean a word of it. I think it was that *ghastly* wallpaper in Virginia’s hall that did it!!!’

And in another letter from her ten days later David read at the bottom of page 4, under ‘Your ever-loving and devoted Mum’: ‘PS. I heard from Mrs Chancellor that Hector was getting into trouble. He bit a postman or something, I gather. So I’m picking him up off a train tomorrow. I’ll bring him to see you next time I come up.’

His hands tightened in fury.

On the next day arrived the most dramatic letter of all – from his father, who never wrote except once a year on David's birthday, and then only a few lines. This was one whole side long, he saw with surprise.

'My dear fellow,' it began. 'I thought you'd better know before you see it in *The Times* on Thursday. I got married yesterday. She's a divine girl called Elaine, not much older than you, so you should both get on well together.'

And at the bottom, under his signature, in a different handwriting: 'Longing to meet you, David. I have been hearing so much about you. Love, Elaine.'

Chapter 7

'Your father's going to pick you up at about 12. He wants you to spend the day at the Dower House and he'll bring you back after dinner.'

'Oh. What's she like, Granny – Elaine?'

'Seems a very nice girl. Very sensible. Very pretty, too. Not covered in lipstick and rouge like most of these young girls today. Your father seems very happy with her. He really needed someone to look after him. And she has very good taste in what she's plannin' to do to their new house.'

His father had left the Navy the day he married Elaine. After a week-end's honeymoon in Copenhagen ('a week-end's all you can stand at my age, dear fellow') the couple had moved in to the Dower House, in spite of the name, little more than an empty farmhouse four miles from Combe. His father was to start work with the local branch of the Forestry Commission.

David had arrived at Combe that morning, after one day in London with his mother. This time he found to his surprise that she was very keen for him to go to Combe as soon as possible.

'Of *course* you must go straight up there at once, darling. I want to hear *all* about her. She's some doctor's daughter and I hear she's simply ravishing, my dear. Of course it's *almost* a case of cradle-snatching. She's almost the same age as you, darling. I wonder how you'll like having a stepmother of eighteen. Poor girl, she doesn't know what she's in for, with your father. Perhaps he's got easier to handle in his old age.'

'He's not old.'

'He's twenty-two years older than her. I just hope he knows what he's doing. Remember, darling – tell me *all* about her, what they've done to their house, what she calls him, *everything*. I want to know every detail. Write it down in your diary if you can't remember.'

David made a mental note to tell her precisely nothing – if he could stand up to the relentless interrogation he knew awaited him on his return. But he had been pleased by one thing that

day – she had brought Hector with her and seemed reconciled to the dog going away.

‘Where did Father meet her, Granny?’

‘I don’t know. In London, I suppose. You know I never pry into things.’

‘Did you know he was going to marry her?’

‘He telephoned the evening before. We were rather surprised – but very pleased for him, of course. He’s been rather lonely. He does need someone to make a home for him.’

‘Want to come for a walk, my boy?’ his grandfather said loudly.

‘He’s going to the Dower House for the day. He hasn’t met Elaine yet.’

‘Elaine? Who’s Elaine? Oh, Elaine. Of course, charming lady. Charming lady.’

He marched slowly out of the room, muttering.

‘Did your mother . . . say anything?’ his grandmother asked.

‘What about?’

‘About . . . your father marrying again.’

‘No, nothing. . . .’

His father picked him up as planned, at midday. Conversation during the drive was stilted. David felt awkward without knowing quite why. He sensed his father felt the same. They talked about Glazebrook, cricket, trees, sheep – but neither mentioned Elaine.

The car turned into a gate and drew up outside a small, square, grey-stone house.

‘This is it. Welcome to the castle.’

David looked apprehensively at the windows for a face, but they were blank. He followed his father up the steps to the front-door, into the hall. The floor was bare wood, obviously waiting for a covering of carpet or matting. Pictures were stacked against the walls. A large open trunk half-full of books almost blocked the way in.

‘Sorry about the chaos, old boy. We’ve only been in about three weeks and everything’s still haywire. Here – this way.’

He beckoned David into a small sitting-room. Again, the floor was bare wood except for a rug in front of the fireplace. A large

log-fire was burning. Two pale green armchairs, a pink sofa, and three occasional tables made a semi-circle round the fireplace. A large brown desk filled the window, piled with papers and letters. No pictures hung on the plain white walls. A well-stocked drinks tray stood in the corner to the right of the door.

It was on the sofa that David's eyes rested. She was lying on her back, one leg crooked up, with a bare foot on the cushion, the other leg draped over the side, the foot resting on the floor. Her shoes, a kind of sandals, lay casually beside the bare foot. The nails were painted bright red. She was dressed completely in black – black trousers, black sweater. Her tawny hair fell round her neck and over her chest in thick waves. She was reading a large book called *Encyclopedia of Cooking*.

She jumped up and rushed towards his father on bare feet. She did not look at David.

'Oh darling, I missed you terribly. Did you miss me?'

His father's answer was stifled as she plunged her mouth on to his and threw her arms round his neck, lifting herself off the ground. Her bare feet writhed, her toes clenched. His father's face was almost hidden by her hair.

David did not know what to do, look or turn away. He gazed at the floor, embarrassed.

'Darling, this is David.'

'Oh, David. I am so sorry. How do you do.' She came over to him. Her hand was warm and strong. She cupped his right hand with her left hand.

'How do you do.'

'I have heard so much about you. We would have asked you to stay with us. But you see what a terrible chaos we're in at the moment. No carpets, nothing. It wouldn't be very comfortable for you here just now. But as soon as we have everything arranged you will come and stay, please, will you? I insist, don't we, darling?'

She let go of David's hand and ran back to his father with her arms outstretched.

'Oo,' she yelped, and fell on one knee holding her right foot. 'Something sharp, darling, help me. Quick.'

His father knelt down beside her and looked at her foot. She put one arm round his neck to steady herself.

'It's a splinter from the floor,' he said. 'You must be mad to go about with no shoes on this floor. I told you that before, darling.'

'Oh darling, please don't be angry with me now. I have just done my toe-nails. *My foot's hurting*. Please make it better, darling, and don't be angry.'

He helped her to her feet. She limped to the sofa and lay on it with the splintered foot propped under a cushion.

'I'll get a needle and put it in boiling water and we'll get the splinter out in no time, old girl,' said his father solicitously, moving towards the door.

'Are you going to leave me, darling?' she said in a mock-childish voice. 'This horrid splinter hurts a lot.'

'David'll look after you for a minute. David, go over and see if you can do anything to stop it hurting, old boy. I'll get this needle ready.'

His father ran upstairs. David walked over to the sofa. She smiled up at him.

'What do you want me to do?' he asked hesitantly.

'Hold my little foot to stop it hurting like mad,' she said. 'See if you can see the nasty bit of wood in it.'

He lifted her foot and looked for the splinter.

'I can't see anything,' he said peering closely, his head only a few inches from her foot. She sat up and bent her head low over her foot so her cheek was almost touching his. He could feel her hair touching his ear: some of it fell on his hand. It was soft and silky. He could smell her hair: a warm smell, comforting, intimate, strangely exciting. The sensation was deep, satisfying. He felt a tingle on his forehead.

'There. There it is, the nasty thing.'

She pointed to the ball of the foot. The end of a splinter was just visible underneath her big toe. She touched it gingerly with a thumb.

'Oo, it hurts. See if you can do anything, David.'

Her hair was still touching his ear as he put a thumb on each side of the splinter and squeezed gently. She gripped his right arm with both hands. As she strained with the pain her head pressed harder on his face. Her breath blew on him.

'No,' she said, sitting back. 'We must wait for the needle. It

hurts too much. *Darling, what are you doing with that needle?*' she shouted.

'I couldn't find one but I've got one now. Coming.'

David let go of her foot. His hands were shaking.

David had been too young to remember his father clearly before the divorce. Since the break-up, he had seen him only at Combe. There he was relaxed, casual, and – by normal standards of behaviour – boorish. Combe was a man's world, where women were tolerated but largely ignored, expected to fend for themselves, amuse themselves, wait hand and foot on the men. At Combe no one ever opened a door for a woman, stood up when she came into the room, offered her plates at table. It just wasn't done. At Christmas-time when the Melrose family gathered together, the segregation of sexes was taken for granted. The men shot all day and played bridge all night, the women might be allowed to go out shooting for a short time after lunch – providing they didn't get in the way and wore clothes of a suitably restrained style and colour – and then knitted or sewed during the evening. It was well-known that the master of the house loathed make-up, painted nails, gaudy headscarves and, most of all, women in trousers. The husbands of women who married into the Melrose family and ignored these unwritten rules were liable to be struck off the invitation list.

The lady of Combe had her rules, too. They were: no breakfast in bed, no dogs in the house, no cigars, no gin. Only recently had she come round to allowing Virginia cigarettes – Turkish had been all right because the master smoked them, but 'Virginia were vulgar'. The only alcohol allowed was beer, whisky, port, and brandy once a year with the plum-pudding on Christmas Day. Beer, whisky and port, though allowed, were strictly rationed by Bradwood the butler. One bottle of beer per male head aged over sixteen for lunch (David had graduated to that distinction during the last Christmas holidays); a decanter containing exactly one measure of whisky per male head over eighteen for dinner; a decanter containing exactly one glass of port per male head over eighteen after dinner; and, as he came to collect the empty coffee cups and say a grand 'Good night', Bradwood would carry in a tray on which there was a soda-water siphon, a jug of water

and a whisky decanter, the contents of which varied considerably according to his master's health and temper, which depended on the weather, the political situation, the game statistics, the Test Match score, and the activities of the rabbits in the flower beds. Bradwood saw to it there was never a drop of whisky more or less than his master's requirements. Bradwood never got it wrong: his intelligence system was faultless. There was no question of a guest with a parched throat stealing out to the cellar or the pantry for more: Bradwood kept all the liquor behind the sort of padlock that was used for securing the main entrance of medieval castles. And there was no question of stealing a drop when the master wasn't looking. If ever one was so rash, '*Bradwood*,' there would be a bellow some time later. 'Ring for Bradwood. Not enough whisky.' When Bradwood came to replenish the decanter – always with the exact amount that had been pilfered – the glance he hurled at whoever he judged to be the guilty party spoke volumes of invective. And the next time the offender had to ask Bradwood for a favour – a packet of razor-blades, a box of matches, even something more important – Bradwood would regret he was 'unable to be of assistance in the matter'. Bradwood always got his own back in the end. Bradwood's word was law.

The moral at Combe was clear: 'If you want a drink, bring your own.' So when at about 6 p.m. his father said 'What about a drink, old boy?' David was considerably surprised.

'Er . . . no thanks.'

'Come on. *We're* having one, aren't we, darling?'

'I bet we are, you lovely lovely man,' said Elaine, pouting her lips in an ardent kiss across the room.

That was not the only surprise David had had during the day. Almost everything his father had said or done had been a surprise. Instead of slouching in chairs and picking his nose, as he did at Combe, he sat upright, silent and stiff, putting his hand over his mouth when he wanted to belch. Even his clothes were different – clean, mended and tidy. He was actually wearing a tie, a new tie at that – something he never did at Combe. His shirt-collar was not frayed. And he hadn't scratched his bottom once all day.

More than that, he never stopped offering his lighter for

Elaine's cigarettes, offering her ash-trays whenever the ash grew long, leaping to open the door for her whenever she left the room – and *standing up* when she came in again.

It was the same in his conversation. Whatever she said, he agreed with. If she disagreed with anything he said, he would back down and say 'Oh well, I expect you're right, darling.' Once she had claimed that the Scots originally came from Iceland. His father said quietly, 'Darling, they did not come from Iceland. Some of them came from Ireland, but not Iceland.'

'Darling, nonsense. They come from Iceland. Don't they, David? David agrees with me – he knows.'

David looked at his father in doubt – he knew who was right.

'I . . . I think Father is right. . . .'

'Now you're both ganging up against me. I tell you it's Iceland. Darling, don't be maddening. Say I'm right, say it's Iceland.'

'Yes, all right. It's Iceland,' said his father. He turned away, avoiding David's eye.

His father and Elaine had gone upstairs after lunch, leaving him with a pile of books. 'Darling, come up with me a minute,' Elaine had said. 'I want to discuss with you the wallpaper for the bedrooms. David can read for a minute – you won't think us rude, will you, David?'

He did not want her to leave the room, he realized, as he flicked through the top book unseeingly. He had been unable to take his eyes off her all through lunch – off her steady blue eyes with the long dark eyelashes. How were they dark when her hair was so fair? And her mouth, free of lipstick but lacking nothing for that: it opened in a tilted way, first at one end, then all of it, to show the teeth. Very white teeth – no, it was her skin that was dark and they showed up white against it. She had a dark skin, suntanned obviously. But it was not her face that attracted his most interested glances: it was the prominent shape under the tight black sweater bursting into two sharp points that showed white through the black, and swayed hypnotically whenever she moved. He felt a mad compulsion to reach out and grab that black sweater. He remembered the sensation when her hair had touched his ear over the splinter: it had been rather like the

feeling he had had once when he watched a master at Glazebrook reading an essay he had written on Alexander the Great. He knew the essay was good because Alexander was his favourite character in history, and watching the master's eye on his writing had given him this kind of deep, satisfied glow – no, this was quite different, really: he wanted to *do* something about this. He knew quite well what this was but he did not like to face it – *he desired his father's wife*. Desired her body. What is more, he realized with growing guilt, whenever she fondled or kissed his father – and she had never stopped doing it all day – he had to turn away not so much from embarrassment as from – yes, an angry jealousy. They hadn't gone upstairs to look at any wall-paper. The picture that came into his mind's eye made his heart thump and his belly tighten.

When they came back into the room she had one arm round his father's neck and the other inside his coat. She was smiling smugly and contentedly into his eyes. . . .

By the time Elaine said 'Dinner is served, gentlemen,' she and his father between them had drunk nearly three-quarters of a bottle of gin. David, under strong persuasion from both, had drunk one gin-and- tonic 'to celebrate the nuptials, old boy'. The gin relieved the tension inside him and he joined in with their giggles and shrieks of laughter.

'Champagne! Champagne!' she shouted as they sat down at the dinner-table. His father obediently trotted down to the cellar, returned with a bottle, and champagne they duly had.

'Brandy, my dear fellow? Come on, drink up that champers,' said his father, slooshing a stiff brandy into a bell-glass before David could say no.

By ten o'clock both Elaine and his father were making no sense at all. His father tried to get up to stoke the fire, but lurched impotently back on to the sofa. David had poured nearly all of his brandy down the lavatory – only to have his glass refilled by his father when he returned. This happened three times.

'Knows how to knock back his brandy, the young fellow, doesn't he, darling? Strong head runs in the family. Has to. Block off the old chip, eh?'

They laughed loud and long.

David grew more and more uncomfortable as the effect of the gin and champagne wore off. Every time he mentioned getting back to Combe his father waved an arm and said, 'In good time, my dear chap. The night is young yet, and you' – addressing the brandy bottle – 'are so beautiful.'

'What about me, darling? Aren't I beautiful, too?'

'Yes, of course you are,' he said as she dived on him and smothered his face with kisses.

By now he knew his father was too drunk to drive. He was planning what to do about this when his father said, 'Look, you'd better stay the night here. We can rustle up a blanket and a pillow and you can sleep on the sofa. Much better than going back now.'

'Yes, David darling, do that. Step-mummy will tuck you in and tell you a fairy-story if you're a good boy.' She giggled hysterically.

'I'd better go and telephone Granny then,' he said.

The telephone was in the hall. He asked for the number and heard it ringing out. He prayed she had not yet gone to bed. On and on it rang. He felt a panic. Then the ringing stopped and her voice said 'Hello.'

'It's me, David, Granny.'

'Oh, David. We were gettin' worried about you. Where are you? Haven't you started back yet?'

'Look, Granny. Father can't drive me back, so please could –'

'Why can't he drive you back? He said he would.'

He lowered his voice, but there was too much laughter from the sitting-room for them to overhear him.

'Because . . . the car won't start, Granny, and the garage is closed. Look, Granny, *please* could you ask Chancellor to come and fetch me.'

'But, David, he's probably in bed and it's much too late to ask him now. Poor man, he's kept so busy. Couldn't you stay the night there if the car won't start? I'm sure they wouldn't mind you stayin' –'

'Granny, if you don't send Chancellor in the car I am going to walk. Walk the whole way back, now.'

Silence on the line. Then:

'All right. Don't get in such a state. I'll ask him if he'll go. If

he can't, I'll telephone back within five minutes. Otherwise, he'll be on his way. Are you all right, David?'

'Yes, thank you, Granny. Thank you, Granny - about the car.'

'Well, we can't have you walkin' five miles in the middle of the night, can we. Never heard such an idiotic thing. I'll wait up for you because you'll never remember to turn off all the lights. Right then, I'm goin' now.'

'Good-bye, Granny.'

He went back into the room, Elaine was lying on the sofa across his father's knees. Her sweater was pulled up under her arms to show a bare back covered only by the white strap of her brassière. It looked very white against the brown of her skin. His father was running his fingers over her back and every few seconds gripping her ribs so she screamed with laughter. They were so engrossed in their drunken game that they did not see him come in and sit down in the armchair opposite. He cleared his throat, but they did not hear him over their laughter. He scraped his shoes on the wooden floor, but still they did not look. He sat. . . .

Her sweater rose higher and higher till it was almost over the back of her head. His father stroked and tickled and gripped, the wild laughter went on. Suddenly she pushed herself up on her knees, put her hands behind her head, and drew the sweater over inside-out so that it enclosed both their heads. Muffled giggles came from inside the woollen cocoon. Her brassière strap must have slipped undone as she pulled herself up, for now the whole brassière fell to the floor. Swelling out from under the black sweater, pressed against his father's shoulder, was her naked breast. It had a line across it where the brown became white and the nipple stood up and out and very red against the white.

'Hell, my bra has gone.' She pulled the sweater down to cover her nakedness. She stood up laughing helplessly, then leaped down to pick up the bra. She saw David.

'David,' she yelled. 'On the first day we meet I show you my tits. Not many girls do that, you know.' More laughter.

She pulled the bra up under her sweater and tried to fasten the clasp at the back. 'I can't do it. Here, darling, help with this damn thing.'

She turned to his father. He was fast asleep, mouth wide open, head lolled on the back of the sofa.

'Darling, wake up,' she shouted. No reaction at all.

'God. David, please help me with this thing.'

She lurched across. David rose nervously from his chair. The bra fell from her hand. She bent down to pick it up and toppled over, landing heavily on her bottom. She giggled foolishly and shook her head slowly from side to side.

'Oh, damn this thing. Let's do it properly. Start at scratch.'

She pulled the sweater off over her head, threw it down angrily and picked up the bra. She looked up at David slowly and saw his wide eyes on her breasts.

'Do you like big tits?' She arched her back so they jutted out out at him. He laughed weakly, felt the blood rise in his cheeks.

'Your father loves them.' She put her hands underneath them and lifted them up. 'Here - touch me. Go on . . . don't be shy. Touch me.'

His heart was pounding so that he could almost hear it. He flicked a glance at his father.

'He sleeps for hours when he goes like that. Go on: touch me, David. Have you ever touched a girl's tits before?'

He stood over her, trembling, fascinated by the breasts she held up towards him.

The rat-tat on the doorknocker made him jump.

'That's the car for me,' he stammered. 'Chancellor's come to take me back.' She looked at him without understanding, her eyes out of focus.

'Here, put this on quickly,' he said, picking up the bra and holding it out for her. She grabbed it, threw it into the corner.

'Well, this then,' he said, handing her the sweater.

She mumbled something. The sweater was all tangled up and he had to unravel it and guide it over her head. As he helped her arms through the holes, his hand touched her nipple. It was hard: he shivered.

He started for the door.

'Good night and thank you very much. Say good night to Father for me and thank him.'

'Wait a minute.' She was unsteadily getting to her feet. 'I'll see you out.'

She staggered towards him, her breasts swinging loosely under the sweater. He caught her by the elbow before she fell, and they both weaved a wavy path to the front door. He did not want Chancellor to see her like that, so he gently leaned her against the wall behind the door. Suddenly her head jerked forward and her open mouth engulfed his. Her tongue pushed hard against his teeth. . . .

He pulled himself away, flung open the door and scampered out, slamming it and nearly knocking over Chancellor, who was standing on the top step and who said in amazement, 'Good Lord, you're in some hurry to get home, aren't you?'

His grandmother was waiting for him.

'Really David, I can't have you makin' these dramatic scenes on the telephone like that. Poor Chancellor I know he was in bed. Did he say anything? Was he angry, I mean?'

'No, not at all. We whizzed back.'

'Now you're not to encourage him to start speeding. We've always kept him down to forty miles an hour. Much safer, and the cars last much longer. What's the point in going fast, anyway? So draughty and bumpy. What did you do all day?'

'Oh, we just sat and talked and I looked round the house. Quite nice it'll be when it's finished, won't it?'

'Yes. Elaine's got very good taste. Surprisin' in someone of her age. Did you get on with her all right? You're usually so difficult and fussy with new people.'

'Yes, fine.'

'Very good-lookin' girl, isn't she?'

'Yes, I suppose she is, really.'

'He seems much happier with her, don't you think?'

'Yes, much.'

'He was a bit lonely before. And of course his wound's always playin' up. She'll look after him anyway. Was the food all right?'

'Yes, very good.'

'She cooks it, doesn't she?'

'Yes, I think she did.'

'What do you mean "think". You must *know*.'

'Well, I mean I never thought. Yes, I suppose she did because

she kept going out of the room beforehand. I dunno. I never thought about who was doing the cooking.'

'What was she wearin'?'

'Trousers.'

'They all seem to nowadays. I think it's a pity, but I suppose they do suit her. What sort of shoes?'

'What, Granny?'

'What sort of shoes was she wearing?'

'Sort of sandals.'

'Did you see her . . . feet?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Were the nails . . . painted?'

'Yes.'

'Yes, I know. It *does* worry your grandfather so much. But you'd never tell Father that, would you. It would hurt him terribly.'

'But, Granny, Father must *know* Grandpa hates painted toenails.'

'Yes, but it's different nowadays. Everything's so different nowadays.'

'Granny, did my mother paint her toenails?'

'What an extraordinary thing to ask.'

'I mean, *did* she? Before the war when she used to come here?'

'Really, David, I can't remember.'

'Of course you can, Granny. Come on.'

'Oh, David, you *are* impossible. Yes, I suppose she did.'

'But it was different in those days, wasn't it?'

'Well, yes. I suppose it was.'

'I see. . . .'

'Now come on up to bed. Help me turn off these lights.'

'Thank you for sending Chancellor and the car, Granny.'

'Poor Chancellor, being turfed out of bed like that. But you were quite right. Much better for your father not to risk drivin' a car at this time of night. . . .'

Chapter 8

'Oh, David, I really don't know. You're so inquisitive about everyone. They're coming for lunch tomorrow. So you'll be able to ask Elaine herself,' said his grandmother.

It was the next evening. David had been firing questions about Elaine. He had been unable to get her out of his mind all day. He dreaded the prospect of meeting her again, after all that had happened the evening before. What would she say? Would she remember? Apologize? And his father – would she have told him? No, obviously not. At least he hoped not – unless it was all simply a tipsy joke. But his father – how could he look him in the face after that? If his father mentioned anything about the evening, about Elaine's behaviour, about the drinking, should he laugh, look surprised, or what?

A still greater fear dominated his worries about the next meeting: would he be able to conceal the feeling she had roused in him? He would have to but. . . .

Last night in bed he had fidgeted and squirmed as the memory-picture of her naked breasts glowed in his mind. Eventually he had stilled the restlessness in the only way he knew how. Afterwards he felt foolish, tainted, rotten. He hated himself. He hated her for tainting his father. And he despised his father for allowing her to taint him.

But in the morning the warm glowing feeling was there again: he felt it even before he was fully awake. It hummed inside him, luring him, accompanied by the memory of her breasts lifted towards him, white, inviting. . . .

That day he had met his father by chance in the stables. He said nothing about the previous evening.

'See you tomorrow, old boy,' he said as he drove off with the usual carefree wave. Thank goodness it was a surprise meeting. Tomorrow suddenly felt less terrifying. But there was still Elaine. Would that be so easy?

'Hello. Come in and get warm,' said his grandmother.

David stood up. At the sound of footsteps outside the sitting-room door his forehead had gone hot and cold.

His father followed Elaine into the room. She embraced his grandmother, shook hands with his grandfather, turned towards him, hand outstretched.

‘Hello, David,’ she said, smiling. ‘How are you?’

He took her hand. ‘Fine, thanks,’ he said, blushing. She turned to his grandmother.

‘We would have loved David to stay the other night but you know what a state the house is in. It would be terrible to stay and I’m sure the blankets are damp.’

They all laughed. Something struck David – *she was wearing trousers.*

During lunch, he did not say much. The others kept up the conversation, mainly about Elaine’s plans for decorating and furnishing the Dower House. His grandmother and Elaine talked together, his father and grandfather spoke in a series of monosyllables. He looked at Elaine and wondered if the other night could really have happened: one would never have thought so, looking at her now, earnest, demure, polite, discussing chair-covers and lampshades. But when his eyes dropped to her sweater – then the throbbing in his temples started and he had to stare hard into his apple tart.

After they had moved back into the sitting room and Brad-wood had brought in the coffee, Elaine said, ‘You will come and see us again, David, won’t you? When do you go back to school?’

‘On the third.’

‘Oh well, there’s plenty of time then. We can’t offer you much fun, but perhaps you could help us move the furniture. We need another strong man.’

His grandmother laughed: ‘David’s much too lazy. It would do him a lot of good to be made to help movin’ furniture around.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he’s not lazy. You aren’t lazy, are you, David?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ he said.

‘Well, we’ll telephone and suggest something. Now, I think we ought to go back, don’t you, darling? We’ve got some people for tea and –’

They embraced and shook hands. His grandfather accompanied them out of the room.

'Why didn't you ask her all those questions you were firing at me?' said his grandmother.

'Oh, I dunno.'

'Awfully nice girl. So good for your father to have someone to look after him. You must go and help them if they ask you. It would give your father so much pleasure.'

'Yes, all right, Granny.'

'You do like her, don't you?'

'Yes, of course.'

'You never spoke much. I just wondered.'

'Of course I like her.'

'Good. It means so much to him if you do. He'd be so hurt if you didn't - he's so sensitive, and he's never been allowed to see as much of you as he'd like.'

'What do you mean, Granny?'

'Well, I mean you've always been with your mother. . . .'

'But I've come here as much as possible.'

'Yes, recently you have. But before that it was awfully difficult. I think he's missed you a lot. After all, you are his only child.'

'But, Granny, he's never come to see me at Glazebrook or -'

'I know, I know. But he's always felt he shouldn't. Your mother might not like it.'

'But she wouldn't mind.'

'Well, it's so difficult with a divorce. You wouldn't understand.' His grandfather came back into the room.

'Did they get off all right?' said his grandmother.

'Yes. Charming lady. Glad to see she doesn't bother about lipstick and all that nonsense.'

David couldn't resist it: 'What about those trousers, Grandpa?'

'What trousers?'

'Her trousers.'

'They all wear 'em nowadays. Very sensible. Charming lady. Want to go for a quick walk round the garden?'

'But don't you *mind* her being in trousers?'

'What? Why? What?'

‘David, go and put on your coat. We’re going for a walk round the garden with Grandpa.’

On the next Saturday afternoon David went out with Mr Lewis, the gamekeeper, looking for pheasants’ nests. Lewis reared pheasants in wire pens round his house. He went round every nesting season collecting pheasants’ eggs to bring them back and place under a regiment of broody chickens. Almost every year since he could remember David had gone out with Lewis to hunt for eggs.

It was not just the search for nests he enjoyed: it was the ride on the pillion of Lewis’s Triumph 500 c.c. motor-bike. Last year he had even been allowed to drive it himself for a short distance.

It was a warm afternoon for April. As they sped along the main road to Hatchett’s Plantation, the wind in their faces was soothing, redolent with the fresh smell of spring.

The Plantation was nearly two miles from the main road. The track leading to it was very muddy after some recent rain, so Lewis left his motor-bike behind the hedge where the track met the road. They set off on foot, each with a straw-lined basket slung over the shoulder.

An hour later, thunder crashed. Rain came down in solid drops that plopped heavily on the carpet of dead leaves in the wood. At first they sheltered under a large oak, but the almost leafless branches gave scant cover.

‘I don’t think it’s going to let up,’ said Lewis. ‘We’d better make back for the bike. We’ll just have to get wet.’

David was wearing a sweater and grey-flannel trousers. When they reached the motor-bike he was soaked.

‘You’d better look in at the house for a cup of tea to warm you up,’ said Mr Lewis. He kicked the starter, the engine stuttered into a roar. David hid his head behind Mr Lewis’s back. The rain-drops stung his hands and lashed against his legs. By the time they reached the Lewis cottage his teeth were chattering.

‘The wife’ll soon fix you up,’ said Mr Lewis. They went dripping in through the back door. Mrs Lewis was an enormous round grey-haired woman with a moustache. She exuded friendliness and domestic efficiency.

‘Oh dear, what a mess you’re in,’ she said, pulling up a wooden

kitchen-chair for David. 'Sit down and we'll have you a warm cup of tea in no time.'

A steaming cup of tea was already in her hand. David took it.

'Wait a minute,' said Mr Lewis.

'What are you looking for, Bill?'

'That bottle of rum. Ah, here it is.'

He came proudly over to David, unscrewing the top of a half-full bottle. 'This'll keep the pneumonia away.'

Five minutes later, David was on the pillion of Lewis's motor-bike heading for Combe. He could feel the rum warming his stomach, like a hot-water bottle inside his shirt.

'Thank you, Mr Lewis.'

'Oh, that's nothing. Sorry it came down to rain. Maybe we'll try again next week. Now you go and get those wet clothes off and get yourself a hot bath.'

He kicked off his squelching wet shoes in the porch and went upstairs in his stockinged feet, leaving a trail of damp foot-marks on the carpet. He intended to undress in the bathroom and step straight into a hot bath. But his clothes were so wet, he decided, that they would make a large pool on the bathroom floor. He would put them in the drying-room, and go back upstairs in a towel. He started running the bath, took his towel off the rail and plodded uncomfortably down the backstairs.

The drying-room was in the basement of the house, at the far end of a dark stone-floored passage lit by one naked, dim bulb. It was a large room with shelves round the walls and racks controlled by pulleys hanging from the ceiling. There were no windows, only one small ventilator. The room smelt of hot linen. The only light, as in the passage outside, came from one naked bulb hanging in the centre. The heat in the room was solid, stifling, static.

He opened the door, felt for the light-switch. The wall of heat hit his face - it reminded him of when he had once been allowed inside an engine-driver's cabin and the fireman had opened the boiler-hatch for him to look in. He turned on the light. The racks were full of sheets, towels, tablecloths. He closed the door and went round looking for an empty space to hang up his clothes. There was an empty space on the end of the fourth rack. He started to undress. All the shivery cold feeling had gone now.

The hot air of the room felt peculiarly pleasant on his bare skin as he took off his sweater and shirt and hung them over the rack. Then his trousers, pants and socks. He stood naked for a moment, stretched himself languorously, took the towel down from the rack where he had thrown it, and dried his legs. He began to think of Elaine.

Then he heard a click over the low hum of the furnace next door. It was the door opening. It shut, then heels clicked on the stone floor. He could neither see nor be seen. Who could it be? He tucked the towel round his waist and peered round the end of the nearest row of hanging linen. No one was visible. The footsteps stopped: the sound of a basket being placed on the floor. He peered stealthily round the next row. No one there, either. It might be Bradwood. If it was, he didn't particularly want Bradwood to see him; he was sure to complain about the wet clothes or the drips on the floor, or something or other. No, it could hardly be Bradwood: he took Saturday afternoons off.

The hanging linen fell to about eighteen inches from the floor. He bent down and looked underneath. Some eight feet away, separated from him by two rows of linen, he saw two black high-heeled shoes and two neat ankles in nylon stockings.

Rosie, the cook! He would jump out on her and give her a fright. He crept along the side of the racks and peered round a large white table-cloth.

It was not Rosie, the cook.

She had her back towards him, taking dry linen down from the rack, folding and stacking it in a large basket. She had dark brown hair that bobbed neatly up and down on her neck as she moved her head. She wore a sleeveless flower-patterned frock, red and green and yellow, tucked in tightly at her waist under a wide green-leather belt.

She turned in profile. Then he recognized her. Of course - Jean, Jean the parlour-maid. She had been at Combe for nearly a year; he had seen her many times, clearing away in the dining-room, drawing the curtains in the evening. She used to smile at him furtively, but he had never spoken to her. She had always worn that absurd uniform, little white hat with hair tucked up

under it, black stockings like a nurse, heavy flat shoes. No wonder he hadn't recognized her, this girl in front of him now was a very different-looking person.

She turned suddenly, saw him, dropped a sheet, put her hands to her cheeks, screamed, eyes wide, terrified. He moved towards her.

'*Sshhh*. It's only me. You know *me*.'

'Oh.' She let out a long sigh, put her hands over her eyes and started shaking. He felt a fool. What did one do with a crying girl? He reached for a handkerchief into where his pocket should have been – Heavens, he'd forgotten: he was only in his towel. No wonder she had screamed and burst into tears: a practically naked man suddenly materializing like that out of a white table-cloth!

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'Sorry, Jean, I didn't mean to frighten you like that. I'm sorry.'

He patted her shoulder. ~

'Please stop crying. I'm terribly sorry.' Had anyone heard her scream? What would Bradwood say if he came in now? She'd probably get sacked, knowing Bradwood's stern ideas of domestic discipline. And *he'd* probably get sacked, too: ignominiously sent packing back home to his mother. He could hear Bradwood addressing his grandmother now: 'I'd like a word with you about Mr David.' Perhaps she'd go to Bradwood and tell him she'd been rudely ambushed in the drying-room. No, he couldn't leave her like this.

'Everything's all right, Jean.'

She took her hands away and, looked at him. Her eyes were quite dry. Far from crying, she was *grinning*. He stared incredulously.

'I'm sorry I screamed like that,' she said. 'It's just that I'm scared stiff of this place, and you jumping out on me like that nearly gave me a heart-attack. Then I couldn't stop laughing. It seemed so funny – you being like that.' She nodded shyly at his towel.

It was the first time he had heard her speak. She had a gay, bubbling voice with a soft accent. She was wearing lipstick and rouge. What a difference it made to her! Gone was the mousy little girl with the nondescript face he had passed carrying trays

of plates: here was a very pretty young woman, warm brown eyes, round pink cheeks.

As the surprise faded, he was suddenly conscious how close she was.

'What are you doing down here anyway?' she said.

'I got soaked in that thunderstorm and didn't want to mess up the bathroom floor with wet clothes. So I took them off down here.'

'What a mad idea. . . . No, I suppose it's quite sensible, really. And you were going all the way upstairs dressed like that?'

'Yes.'

'You weren't worried you might meet somebody?'

'No. No worse than bathing-trunks, is it?'

She laughed. 'Who on earth goes round this house in bathing-trunks?'

'I've often seen Mr Bradwood in them.' She put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles. The sound spluttered through her fingers. She looked mock-guilty at finding the idea of Bradwood in bathing-trunks so funny.

'Well, I suppose I'd better be getting on with my work,' she said, moving to pick up the basket.

'No, wait a bit. Couldn't we go on talking?'

Her eyes questioned his, recognized something in them, then looked away. She made no further move to pick up the basket.

'Suppose someone comes in?' she said, softly.

'No one'll come in here. Who could? It's Mr. Bradwood's afternoon off. Anyway, there's nothing wrong in us talking in here.'

'It's funny, though I've been here nearly twelve months and you've never talked to me before. Never spoken a word.'

'But I haven't been here all that much. Anyway, there's never really been the chance.'

'You could have spoken to me if you'd wanted to. You never even looked at me when I served at table. I used to look at you the whole time. You never looked back. I got fed up.'

'Why did you look at me?'

'Oh, no reason really. I thought you looked . . . well, friendly. No point in looking at the old man, is there?' She chuckled and stared thoughtfully at the floor for a second.

'Look now, I must be going. Rosie'll be wondering where I've got to. Anyway, you'll be catching your death of cold staying so long in this heat, then going out into that cold passage.'

It could have been the temperature in the drying-room; it could have been the therapy of Mr Lewis's slug of rum; or it could have been the new, strangely exhilarating sensation of standing almost naked a few inches away from a pretty girl. Whatever the cause, there was a heavy, potent throb in his belly that made him want to stay with her, to listen to her talk, to watch her mouth move and her eyes twinkle and her hair bob about when she turned her head. He wanted to know more about her. Most of all he wanted to touch her. Her to touch him.

'How old are you, Jean?'

'Sixteen last September. You're sixteen, aren't you?'

'Yes. Nearly seventeen.'

'What sign are you?'

'Sign?'

'You know, horoscope sign.'

'Oh yes. Taurus.'

'Oh the strong romantic type?'

'What are you?'

'Virgo.'

He laughed. She gave him a questioning glance.

'What are you laughing at?'

'Nothing. It's just . . . do you know what Virgo means in Latin?'

'Virgin, doesn't it?'

'Yes.'

'What's funny then?'

'Nothing. Do you know what a virgin is?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well . . . are you one?'

'What a cheeky thing to say. The cheek of it.' She blushed and fiddled with a charm bracelet on her wrist. 'What do you want to know for, anyway? What business is it of yours?'

'It's none of my business, I suppose. I just wanted to know. Sorry I asked. You're not angry, are you?'

'No, not really. . . . Anyway I *am* one, so there you are.'

Now it was his turn to feel embarrassed. She saw his discomfort.

'Don't worry, I don't really mind you asking. Just a bit unexpected somehow. I'm not angry.' She laid a hand on his upper arm. The touch of her fingers was cold in the hot air of the room, the shock of them exciting. He looked straight at her.

'Jean . . . can we talk again sometime? I mean -'

'Well, when? I mean, I'm working all day and Mr Bradwood's always at me, and it wouldn't do for me to be seen talking to you now, would it?'

'What, you mean you don't want to, then?'

'It's not that at all.' She paused. 'I wouldn't be here now if I didn't.'

He took her hand from his arm and held it. It felt cool and neat. He squeezed it slightly.

'Jean, we could talk at night. After you've finished work.'

'But that's late. Not till after the dinner things are all washed up. Sometimes not till half-past ten or eleven.'

'That doesn't matter.'

'But where? Not here, surely?'

'No, no. Where's your bedroom?'

'Now we can't talk in *my* room, I'll tell you that for a start. Rosie's right next door and what on earth would *she* think? It'd be all round the place next morning.'

'Is your room on the top passage, through that green door.'

'Yes. Right at the end, on the left.'

'Well, mine's this side of the green door. Quite near.'

'Oh, I wouldn't dare go into your room. Suppose your grandmother came in? You'd get shot and I'd get sacked. I'd never live it down.'

'She never moves about after going to bed. It'd be quite safe.'

'No. I'd be dead scared, honest. I couldn't do it.'

'Listen, I've got an idea. Next to my bedroom there's a spare room. No one in it at all. No one'd go in there. We could meet there.'

She puckered her brow, weighing up the suggestion carefully.

'What, you mean I'd have to go there? Supposing Rosie saw me? What would I say I was doing?'

'Wait till she's gone to bed.'

'She might hear me. Those passages are awfully creaky.'

'Tiptoe quietly.'

'She'd see the light under the door.'

'Have you got a torch?'

'Yes.'

'Well, use that.'

She considered the matter carefully again, her eyes on his face.

'It'd be awful cold.'

'Well, wrap up in a coat. You could be going to the lavatory after all.'

She grinned shyly: 'All right, then. Nothing venture, nothing gain.'

'Good.' He squeezed her hand harder.

'When shall we meet? Tonight?' he said eagerly.

'Tonight?'

'Yes, why not?'

'I'm going to the pictures. I won't be back till nearly midnight.'

'Well, that's fine. Rosie'll be asleep.'

'It's not too late for you?'

'No, no. Midnight then, in the spare room next to mine? All right?'

A smile slowly spread over her face. She put her other hand round behind his neck.

'You're a Taurus all right, aren't you,' she said softly.

Their mouths joined. . . . At first David thought the knocking sound was something that must always accompany a kiss. Then he realized it was the sound of footsteps outside in the passage.

'Quick, quick. You scram, quick' she said, breaking from him, grabbing the basket. She scurried round behind the hung linen to the far end of the drying room. David checked his towel was safely tucked in and ran for the door.

'Mr David.' Rosie's voice called outside the door. .

He flung it open, switched off the drying-room light and rushed out into the passage, almost knocking Rosie over.

'Good Lord, Mr David, where *have* you been? They're all going mad, shouting for you.'

‘Why? I’ve been hanging up my wet clothes, that’s all.’

‘Did you start that bath running then?’

‘Oh, heavens. Yes, I did. I forgot about that.’

‘I should think you did. There’s a fine old mess now. The *water’s run right over and it’s dripping through the sitting-room ceiling straight on to your grandfather’s arm-chair.*’

Chapter 9

'What's wrong with you this evening, David? You can't sit still for a moment. Do stop fidgeting about.'

'Sorry, Granny.'

'Perhaps you caught a chill. You must be mad to go out like that without a mackintosh.'

'It was perfectly fine when we left.'

'Spot of rain never harmed anyone, long as you leap into a good hot bath straight afterwards,' mumbled his grandfather.

It was after dinner. They were sitting round the fire in the sitting-room; Grandfather, deep in an arm-chair, sucking on a thick curved pipe, reading *The Countryman*, dozing off to sleep every few minutes, when his pipe would drop on his chest and have to be rescued by David before a burning ember set fire to his waistcoat; Grandmother, knitting as always, legs stretched out, ankles crossed, right foot wiggling in time to the tick of the French clock on the mantelpiece; grandson on the floor between them, Arab-fashion on the hearth-rug, flicking through old copies of *The Field*.

At the word 'bath' his grandmother looked sharply across to see if the remark was meant as a joke. The old man's head was nodding again. Out fell the pipe, sliding over the open pages of *The Countryman* on to the floor. Sparks scattered over the carpet.

'David, quick, *do* something. We'll all be on fire. no! Don't tread them into the carpet, you idiot,' she squeaked. David picked the steel shovel from the fireplace and scooped up the bits of burning tobacco. The shovel knocked his grandfather's slipper. The old man woke with a start.

'What, the devil are you doing with that shovel?'

'Some burning tobacco fell out of your pipe, Grandpa.'

'Nonsense. Never falls out if you pack it properly. Must have been stuff from the fire. Where is my pipe, anyway?'

'Here.' David handed it to him.

'Damned modern mouthpiece. Always slides out of your mouth.'

'Do ~~try~~ and keep it in,' pleaded his grandmother. 'One day

you'll go to sleep and the whole house'll catch fire. It's so dangerous.'

'Not much chance of that happening tonight. Whole place is still wringing wet from that damned bath,' growled his grandfather. There was a large damp circle on the white ceiling directly above the place where the old man's chair usually stood. That evening his chair had had to be removed to be dried. In its place was an enormous enamel basin - to catch the drops still falling from the ceiling.

'Yes, I'm very angry with you about that, David.'

'Oh, Granny, don't go on about it. I've said I'm sorry. I can't do anything more.'

'But you haven't said what you were doing all that time. How could you forget you'd started it running? Where did you go?'

'I told you. To the drying-room, with my clothes.'

'But it must have been running for half an hour. The whole passage was under water.'

'No, it wasn't as long as that, honestly. The taps just run very fast.'

'Well, it's lucky someone stopped it in time. It's done enough damage as it is. The carpet upstairs is ruined. And this ceiling will have to be repainted. He might have electrocuted the whole house, mightn't he?'

'What's that?' said his grandfather.

'I said with all that water he might have electrocuted the whole house.'

'No, no. No, no. Quite impossible. Quite impossible.'

'But you said so yourself -'

'Nonsense, nonsense.' His grandfather, puffing like a horse in cold weather, rose laboriously from his chair, pushing himself up by each arm. The pipe wobbled loosely between his teeth.

'Off to bed. Remember the lights.' It was his regular nightly valediction. The old man stopped beside the enamel basin to refill his pipe.

'You ought to go to bed, too, David,' said his grandmother.

David looked at his watch. It read 10.45.

'Yes, I'm going any minute -'

'Who let that blasted bird in here?' exploded his grandfather, his hand on top of his bald head. '

'What bird, dear?' His grandmother looked puzzled. All three looked up at the ceiling.

'Someone's let in one of those damned tits.'

'It's not a bird. It's the drips from the ceiling, dear.'

'Huh. Felt just like some damned bird.' The old man walked slowly from the room muttering 'damned bird'.

'You're not to laugh at your grandfather, David. You should be ashamed of yourself enough already.'

'Sorry, Granny. It just seemed so funny.'

'Well, there's nothing funny about it at all.'

David grinned hard at the dark eyes behind the spectacles. They were trying to be serious, but when they looked up and met his they could not keep their seriousness. Her face creased unwillingly into a smile.

'No, there's nothing funny about it at all. Now go to bed. At once. No wonder your mother gets fed up with you. . . .'

In his bedroom David kept checking his watch. An hour to go. Should he undress? Yes, dressing-gown and pyjamas were the answer. Would she meet him? . . . What a mad idea, anyway. Well, she probably wouldn't come, just said she would to be polite.

When he had rushed upstairs in his towel, there had been so much fuss over the bath-water, mopping up, fetching dishcloths and basins, moving furniture, that he had temporarily forgotten about Jean. But when the fuss subsided, and he was dressing in his room before dinner, he remembered every detail of the drying-room scene. He felt nervous as he remembered: almost ashamed somehow, yet excited. He had *kissed* her. . . . He had kissed a girl only once before, Shirley Tensman, the vet's daughter, going home in a hired car after a pony-club dance a year ago. It wasn't a proper kiss. A dare, more than anything.

'I think you ought to kiss me,' Shirley Tensman had said.

'Why?'

'Because.'

'Why because?'

'Because, because. Please. It's very rude not to kiss a girl when she asks you, you know.'

'Oh, all right,' David said ungallantly. She was not all that unattractive in the saddle, but a party frock did not suit her

somehow. He had only seen her in jodhpurs at gymkhanas, never considered her in kissing terms. He reluctantly planted a peck on her offered cheek.

'Not there, stupid. On my lips,' she said, pouting at him. He could just see her face in the diffused light from the taxi dashboard. Nothing else for it: chivalry must win.

Four tightly compressed lips brushed for half a second.

'I wonder why people make such a fuss about kissing,' Shirley said, sinking back into the far corner of the back seat, with the air of having attained, in one dramatic step, the state of initiated womanhood. 'There's really nothing to it, is there. Soppy, if you ask me. . . .'

But Jean . . . Jean had not been like that at all. He had not even thought whether or not he was going to kiss her. They had simply seemed each to know what the other was thinking. And moved accordingly. Her mouth had not felt like Shirley's, either. It had moved, moved into his. He tried to recall every nuance of the feeling.

He looked at his watch - 11.30. His hands were sweaty, his stomach fluttery. He sat on his bed in dressing-gown and pyjamas, teeth cleaned, hair brushed, slippers on, wondering what to do for the next half-hour.

He put out the bedside light and tiptoed in darkness to the door, knocking his shin hard on the chair at the end of his bed. The noise made him jump. Now he was shaking. Slowly, silently, open the door: the passage dark and still. Close the door, feel the way along the wall towards the spare room.

His fingers knocked pictures, the floorboards creaked loudly, his knee-joints cracked with almost every step. Someone *must* hear him. Between each step he paused, holding his breath, listening for any suspicious noise. What he would do if he heard one he didn't know. Scamper guiltily back to his room, he supposed.

At last, after what had seemed like a hundred hours and a hundred yards, his hand touched the door-jamb of the spare room. He felt for the handle, slowly turned it. The squeaks of old age and no lubrication echoed down the passage like a cat-call. His heart hammered.

The door was locked - and there was no key in the lock.

A momentary panic. The key to *his room* - perhaps it would

fit. Back down the passage, remove the key from his door, along again to the spare-room. With the creaks and cracks, he thought he must have woken the entire household. He was now shivering.

He felt for the keyhole, eased in the key. Would it fit? He turned the key.

There was a noise like a pistol shot. The lock sprang open. Panic again: he turned the handle, opened the door, stepped into the room, started closing the door quietly behind him. A sound outside in the passage. The sound, unmistakable, of someone opening the green baize door further down the passage. An even greater panic. He dared not shut the door – the noise would be deafening. He would have to leave it open and hide inside the spare room. It could be Bradwood, checking the lights were switched off. Or a night-watchman perhaps. Did they have a night-watchman at Combe?

The curtains were open, letting in enough moonlight to make the room seem quite bright after the pitch-dark of the windowless passage.

Sound of the green baize door creaking back on its pulley: someone was coming. Hide behind the bed – *quickly*! In his tip-toeing up the passage, his dressing-gown cord must have slipped undone. He trod on it and stumbled, groping wildly for support from an old-fashioned wash-stand. On it stood a china basin, jug and soap-dish.

With a crash, David and the wash-stand collapsed to the floor. He lay there, too dazed to move. A beam of light shone in his eyes for a second, played on the debris round him, then switched off. Who was it? Bradwood, probably – and now the room light would flash on. He felt resigned to humiliation. But it was not the light that flashed on: it was the torch again blinding him.

‘Do you want to wake the dead?’ a voice whispered hoarsely.

It was Jean. His head fell on his forearm in relief. He felt weak, wet with the sweat of fright, dizzy. Her whispers came through an echo-chamber.

‘We’d better clear up this mess. In case anyone’s heard the noise. They might come and see what was happening. What were you doing, anyway?’

‘Sorry. I tripped in the dark.’ He raised his head towards her, but the torch shone in his eyes.

In the light of her torch they put the washstand on its feet. Only the basin had broken – in two clean pieces across the middle. The jug and the soap-dish, miraculously, were still intact. The two pieces of basin neatly fitted into each other. One would not have known it had been broken.

‘Thank God for that,’ he said. She was just visible in the reflected light of the torch, still wearing the flower-patterned dress.

‘You’re early. I thought it was someone else,’ he whispered.

‘Who else could it be? I knew it must be you,’ she whispered back. ‘Who else would be walking about in the dark at this time of night.’

‘I didn’t think you’d come.’

‘Why not? I said I would.’

‘I know. But –’

‘Well, to be honest, I nearly didn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘It seemed . . . wrong, really, when I thought about it.’

‘Why wrong?’

‘Well, I mean, I don’t make a habit of this sort of thing, you know. Meeting men in bedrooms at midnight. After all, we don’t really know each other, do we?’

‘Why did you come then?’

‘I dunno really. Why did you?’

‘Because I wanted . . . to see you again.’

‘Perhaps that’s my reason, too. I still think it’s wrong. Somehow. It’s cold in here.’

‘I know. I’m shivering. There’s no electric fire, is there?’

She flashed the torch round the room. It showed, apart from the wash-stand, a tall wardrobe, a chest of drawers with some books on it, a screen, a wooden chair in front of a dressing-table with a large swivelling mirror, and an antiquated brass-framed double-bed covered by a white counterpane.

‘No, doesn’t look like it.’ The torch-beam oscillated in her shivering hand.

‘We must get warm,’ he said. ‘You’ll catch a cold. Let’s wrap up under this.’ He pointed to the counterpane, pulled it off the bed and wrapped it round her.

‘Here. You’re cold too. What about you? You’d better wrap

up in this too.' She offered him an end of the counterpane. He wrapped it round himself. They looked at each other: her eyes glinted in the torch-light. He said, 'We can't really stand like this, can we?'

'Does seem a bit stupid, doesn't it?'

'Better lie down. More comfortable.'

With much pushing and pulling inside the counterpane they manoeuvred on to the bed, and lay back on the top blanket, their heads on the bare bolster across the top.

'That's better, isn't it?' he said.

'Umm. I'll say.' They tucked the counterpane underneath them to make a cocoon. The bedsprings creaked.

'Here, steady,' she said. 'I don't want to crease my dress too badly.' There was a soft thud. David said, 'Shh. What was that?'

'Only my shoes falling off, stupid.' They laughed and wriggled together. He felt the warmth of her body down his right side. His right hand touched her left; he held it.

'You're still cold, Jean.'

'We'll soon get warm under this.'

'Fun, this, isn't it?'

'Yes. But it's wrong.'

'What's wrong?'

'Me being here with you. Like this.'

'I can't see what's wrong about it.'

'Well what would your grandmother say about it?'

'That's different. She wouldn't understand. She's old-fashioned about things.'

'My mother wouldn't like it either.'

'Where does your mother live?'

'In Swindon.'

'With your father?'

'What do you mean? Of course with my father.'

'I thought he might be dead or something.'

'No, he keeps the shop. She works in the shop, too.'

'What sort of shop?'

'Tobacconist's. My brother's starting this month with them. Just back from the Army. Malaya. In the jungle. All those spiders. Ugh.' She wriggled.

'Don't you like spiders?'

'Oo, I hate them. Nasty creepy things. There's always one in our bathroom and I have to get Rosie to come and get it out. You can't kill them, you know. You can't wash them down the plug. It's unlucky, so they say.'

'Always one in your bath?'

'Have you *seen* our bathroom. You should have a look some day.'

'Why?'

'Well, I thought, you know, a big house like this, things'd be . . . well different. But the rooms along there are worse than our rooms back in Swindon.'

'How worse?'

'Well the bathroom's a disgrace, really it is. Damp on the wall, and you're lucky if the plug works in the lavatory. I don't want to be, well, vulgar, but honestly, sometimes you have to pull it maybe ten times and then it only half works. It smells, you know, you can't help it. Rosie and I try to keep it clean but it's a waste of time. Rosie's been here for ten years and she's got sort of used to things. But my mother – she'd have a fit if she saw that bathroom. It's disgusting, really it is.'

'Haven't you told anyone about it?'

'Oh yes. I said something to Mr Bradwood when I first came. But he just looked at me as if I'd slanged the Pope or someone and said "What's good enough for Rosie is good enough for you." And that was that.'

'But does my grandmother know about it? She's mad about cleanness and damp and things like that. She hates dogs and cigarette-ends and lavatories in other people's houses.'

'Well, you can't expect the likes of her to worry about bathrooms for the likes of us, can you now? I mean, that would be too much.'

'What about your bedroom?'

'You should see it sometime. I mean, the wallpaper's all peeling off and there's that mildew stuff on the wall, there's no carpet, and honestly, the *bed*! You'd have to be one of those Chinese people at the circus, you know, the people who get into weird positions, like –'

'You mean contortionists?'

'Yes, them. You'd have to be one of them to get comfortable in *that* bed. I mean, this bed here, this is like I-don't-know-what it's so comfortable after mine, I can tell you. I couldn't sleep a wink for the first few nights I was here. Then you sort of get used to it. You get used to anything, I suppose, eventually. Like Rosie.'

'Couldn't you get someone to fix it?'

'No one does anything for nothing, you know.'

'You could pay them.'

'Pay them? Do you know what I get paid here?'

'No.'

'Two pounds ten a week.'

'Isn't that enough?'

'Enough? It might be just enough if you never put your face out of the house. Like Rosie. But she's older. She's quite happy sitting with the radio in the evenings. I like to go out sometimes. I've got a friend in the town, Elsie, we go to the pictures, socials, a dance sometimes, anything that's going on. You need a bit of money to do that. Elsie's all right: she gets six pounds a week in the factory. She can buy all the make-up and dresses and such she needs. But two pounds ten – that's different.'

'Why did you come here then?'

'When I left school my mother said, "Jean love, you ought to go into domestic service for a while. Teach you how to look after a house. And you'll see how those that's better off than you behave. Set you a good example." So I answered an ad in the local paper. But I won't stay here long. Elsie says she could help me get a job in the factory. But I don't know that Mother'd like it, me being in a factory. She has funny ideas sometimes, does Mother. Here – you do ask some questions. Found out all about me already, you have. What about you?'

'There's nothing much to know about me.'

'Oh yes, there is. Can I ask you something?'

'Yes.'

'You won't mind?'

'No. Go on. Ask anything you like.'

'All right then. Sure you won't think it personal?'

'No. Anything. I don't mind.'

'Well then – why do you spend so much time here? I mean,

not with your parents? I've always been curious about that. You don't mind me asking, do you?'

'No . . . it's just that I like it here better.'

'But, I mean, it's kind of funny not living with your parents, isn't it? I mean, I know they're divorced, but you could live with one of them and then the other. Share out the time, half and half.'

'It's because – well, I don't get on very well with them, you see.'

'But you always used to go out with your father when he came here. I used to watch you out of the pantry window. Always together, like a pair of schoolboys you were.'

'Yes. But he's married again now. And it's – well, different.'

'She's quite the little lady, isn't she?'

'Who?'

'Mrs . . . what is she then, your step-mother, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Young, isn't she?'

'Yes. Eighteen.'

'All the lads on the farm talk about her. One of them asked me to get a picture of her for him. Quite taken with her, he was. Just to look at. Of course, I said I couldn't do any such thing.'

'Do you see them a lot then?'

'Who?'

'The boys on the farm.'

'Oh, them. No. Just now and again, when I go to fetch eggs for Rosie. They're funny, though. Always whistling and calling at you. I don't take any notice of them.'

'Do you have a boy-friend of your own?'

'You do ask questions, honest. I've never met anyone who asked all these questions.'

'Do you though?'

'Why? What's it to you?'

'Well I was just interested, that's all.'

'Not really. Only Alec. Alec James. He drives the butcher's van. Been to the pictures with him a few times. And dancing. He's a good dancer. Always saying he wants to marry me. Only for a laugh. Imagine it.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-one.'

'Do you like him?'
 'Oh yes. He's good fun.'
 'Is he - what's he like?'
 'Oh all the girls love Alec. Tall, black hair, bushy sort of eyebrows. Looks like Gregory Peck. A bit, anyway. *He* thinks he does.'
 'What . . . do you do with him?'
 'Do?'
 'Well, after the dances.'
 'He brings me back here. Got a Ford Prefect. Green.'
 'Does he come into the house?'
 'Oh no. I'd never let him do that.'
 'Does he ever want to?'
 'He used to ask me. Try to make me let him come in. But he doesn't any more.'
 'Why did he want to come in?'
 'Oh, the usual.'
 'So what did you do instead?'
 'Sit in the car.'
 'Did he . . . kiss you?'
 'You and your questions, honest. . . . Yes.'
 'A lot?'
 'Suppose so.'
 'More than kissing?'
 'He was always trying to. but I wouldn't let him. I didn't want him to. I didn't mind a bit of fun, but Alec's always trying for more. He's got a good sense of humour though.'
 'Have you ever . . . done any more with anyone else?'
 'Me? Not on your life. What about you now? How many girls have you kissed? Hundreds, I'll bet.'
 'Only you. And one other. *Scrt* of kissed.'
 'Oh, come on, stop kidding. You've kissed hundreds, I'll bet.' She nudged him with her elbow.
 They had been lying on their backs side by side, hands clasped, looking up at the ceiling. By now the counterpane cocoon was warm with their bodies. As he became warmer and more relaxed, David found her closeness at first comforting, then deeply exciting. The nudging of her elbow increased his excitement. He raised himself on his own elbow and looked down at her face.

The outline was just visible in the reflected moonlight. Her eyes were sockets of shadow.

He said, 'Where's your torch?'

'Why?'

'I want it a minute.'

She pulled her right hand out from the counterpane.

'Here. Why do you want it?'

He took it from her. The beam lit up her face.

'Hey,' she said loudly, blinking and shutting her eyes tightly.

'Sh.'

'You're blinding me. Put it out. Please.'

She lay in the beam, eyes closed, smiling contentedly. She said, 'What are you doing?'

'Just looking at you.'

'Why?'

'Because I like looking at you. You're very pretty.'

'You really think I'm pretty?'

'Yes. Very pretty.'

'Beautiful?'

David kissed her. She did not move. The torch slipped from his hand among the folds of the counterpane, giving a soft cream-coloured glow.

Then her hands came up to grasp each side of his neck. Her mouth opened. . . .

'It's wrong, you know, this,' she whispered. David kissed her again.

'You'll crease my dress.' David was now lying almost on top of her.

'Take it off,' he said.

'No, I daren't. Someone might come in.'

'They can't. I locked the door.'

She sat up, undid the buttons down the back, then pulled off the dress. She snuggled down, the counterpane drawn tight up round her neck. David took off his dressing-gown and pyjama jacket, threw them on the floor, snuggled in beside her. Bare flesh against bare flesh.

'You've taken everything off,' she said, alarmed.

'No, I haven't. Only my dressing-gown and pyjama top.'

'Why?'

'Too hot. Anyway, it's nicer like this. Do you mind?'

'No.'

They kissed again, more passionately. Both were breathing fast. She forced her mouth away from his.

'Stop. Stop a minute. Please.' Her body moved up and down under him with the deep breaths.

'Don't you like being kissed?'

'Yes. It's not that. It's . . .'

'Don't you like me kissing you? You'd rather it was Alec, you mean?'

'No, it's not that either. Alec means nothing to me.'

'What is it then?'

'It's just . . . that I *do* like it, you see. And I know it's wrong to like it.'

'What's wrong if you like it?'

'Well, you kissing me.'

'I don't understand.'

'Well me being . . . who I am and you being who you are.'

'What do you mean, Jean?'

'It could give me ideas, you see. I could get fond of you and -'

'And what?'

'Oh, never mind now.'

They kissed again. His hand went down her neck, over her shoulder and touched her bra. He put his hand over the cup.

'Take it off,' he whispered.

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Well . . . it's not . . . I've never done that before.'

'Not with Alec?'

'No, *never*.'

'Take it off. Please.'

'Why?'

'Because I want you to.'

'Why, though?'

'Because . . . I want to touch you . . . there. Please.'

After a few seconds she arched her back and put her hands underneath her. The sound of a clip being undone. Something fell on the floor. She pulled the counterpane up, tight round her neck again.

His hand felt underneath the folds. Her breast was cool, smooth, pliable, filling his whole hand. She moved her body gently from side to side, pushing her breast into his hand.

'Do you like doing that?' she said.

'Yes. It's wonderful.'

With his other hand he felt for the torch in the counterpane folds beside her.

'What are you doing?' she said.

He switched on the torch.

'No.' She grabbed the torch from him, switched it off, tucked it under the bolster behind her head.

'Why?' he said.

'No. Just no, that's all. I'm shy, that's all.'

His head went under the counterpane and his mouth touched the cool skin. Her hand went under his chin and gently drew his head up to hers. They kissed, bodies kneading together. David's hand pressed into her breast, then glided impulsively down over her bare stomach.

She pushed him backwards and upwards.

'No,' she gasped. 'Not there. Not there.'

'Why not?'

'No. I'll go if you do that. Not that, please.'

'Sorry. All right then.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.' She sank back.

They kissed again. His hand forced more urgently down on the hard centre of her breast. Now he lay on top of her, pressing, pressing, pressing, into the softness of her stomach.

Eventually she broke free and firmly but gently pushed him back. They lay, head beside head, breathing in rhythm. Neither spoke.

Then she said, 'Why are you doing this to me?'

'Because . . . I want to.'

'Why?'

'I've never done it before.'

'Never before? You? I thought you -'

'I haven't. Honestly.'

'But why me?'

'I don't know.'

'Because you thought it would be . . . well, easy?'

'No.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Sure. I never . . . thought it would be easy. It just happened, didn't it? Did you think this would happen?'

'I didn't know. I suppose I thought it . . . might. But it's wrong.'

'Please stop saying it's wrong. Why is it wrong?'

'You know it is. Me - and you.'

'You don't want to go, do you?'

'Why should I?'

He guided her left hand below the counterpane.

'No,' she said.

'Yes. Please. Just like that.' She did not resist. He took her hand down over his stomach, over his pyjama trousers.

'No,' she said again.

'Yes. Please. Just like that. It's all right: it's outside.' Again she did not resist, but shuddered as he pressed her hand into him. . . .

Then he quickly lifted her hand away.

'You must think me awful,' she said.

'Why awful?'

'Well, to do this. Behave like this -'

'Of course, I don't.'

'My mother would have a fit.'

'I expect mine would, too.'

'What because of me, you mean? Being a parlour-maid?'

'No, not because of that. Nothing to do with that. Just . . . being like this. Doing all this.'

'Did you enjoy it? You weren't disappointed?'

'Why should I be?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Were you?'

'No. I'm glad I came. I wanted to have the chance . . . to know you a bit more. Lord, look at the time. I *must* go now. I have to be up at seven.'

'When can I see you again, Jean?'

'When do you want to?'

'Tomorrow? Same time? Here?'

'If you want to. Just don't go knocking over furniture next time now.'

He hugged her.

'Where's my bra? Oh, thanks.'

He put on his pyjama top and dressing-gown.

When she was fully clothed, they both straightened the counterpane.

'That's that,' she said. 'Now you'd better go first and I'll shine the torch for you.'

'All right.' He hugged her and kissed her temple.

'Good night, Jean. Tomorrow night, remember?'

'Yes. Good night, David. Don't tell anyone, will you?'

'As if I would. Of course not.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

'Good night, Jean.'

'Good night, David.'

'Oh Jean?'

'Yes?'

'What's your surname?'

'My surname? Holmes. Why? What a funny question to ask now.'

'Just wondered. Good night, Miss Holmes.'

'Good night, Mr Melrose.'

Chapter 10

It was the last evening of the holidays at Combe. After dinner David was to take the train to London – and back to Glazebrook. It was 6.45 p.m. According to their rigid routine his grandparents had gone upstairs to bath and change. David sat alone in the sitting-room. It was nearly dark outside. The curtains had not yet been drawn, so the room was nearly dark too. He did not turn on a light, but stared into the fire at the shapes and colours of the flames, thinking about the last ten days. About Jean.

After the kiss in the drying-room, he had met her in the spare-room almost every night. The length of their meetings had varied. Sometimes they would stay together for two hours. Sometimes, when Jean said she was tired, or she had to get up especially early, they would talk for perhaps only ten minutes, and then she would go. But as long as he saw her, and talked to her, he fell asleep as soon as he got back to his own bed.

She had told him all about Swindon, about her family, about the shop. He had told her all about his mother, and Glazebrook. But he never mentioned his father and Elaine. Since he had met Jean, he had almost forgotten that first evening with Elaine. He had been twice for lunch to his father's house since then. Elaine had been kind and normal, never drank too much, never behaved oddly. He felt natural with her now. *Almost* natural. It was no longer his own relationship with Elaine that disturbed him: she and his father . . . he *knew* they weren't right together, however happy they looked, however happy they made his grandparents. He didn't understand why: he sensed it. Just as he had sensed the divorce years before it happened.

Now it was all Jean, all Jean in his thoughts. Was he in love with her? What *was* being in love with someone anyway? He simply knew he needed her. All day he looked forward to their meeting in the spare-room.

He thought sometimes about Alec James, too. She often talked about 'Alec', quoting what he had said about this and that. She had gone to a dance one night with Alec – almost the only night she had said she couldn't come to the spare-room. David had

lain awake that night, hating the idea of her dancing with Alec. The next night when he met her, she laughed when he quizzed her on what she had done.

'Oh you and your questions. Why are you so interested in Alec, anyway? He means nothing to me. It's much more fun here - with you. Don't you believe me? Cross my heart.'

In all their meetings she had never been completely naked. She never allowed him to take off her pants. But after a few meetings she allowed him to take off his pyjama trousers.

'It's all right for you to, but it's a bit different for me,' she said. 'We could get into a piece of hot water that way. And that'd spoil everything. Believe me, David. It's better. Strong heads must go with strong hearts.' In a converse way he was glad she kept on her pants: he did not quite know what he would do if she did take them off. He knew what he wanted to do, but then . . .

One evening when Bradwood had been off-duty she had handed round the soufflé at dinner. He watched her closely, trying to catch her eye. She never looked at him. When she was standing by his chair and he was spooning out the soufflé with one hand, his other hand went down beside the chair and squeezed her calf.

She did not move. As she walked towards the door he saw she was red in the cheeks. He caught his grandmother's eye as he picked up his spoon. She had seen his look at Jean, and there was a sharp light of interest behind her spectacles. But she said nothing.

That evening after dinner he had said to his grandmother, 'Granny, where does the staff sleep?'

'In the servants' wing. The top passage beyond your bedroom. Why?'

'I just wondered. Do they have . . . nice bedrooms?'

'What do you mean? Ordinary bedrooms.'

'When did you last see them?'

'What extraordinary questions you do ask. I really don't know. Not for some time. One doesn't go barging into other people's bedrooms.'

'But, I mean, are they all right?'

'Of course they're all right. Why shouldn't they be?'

‘Well, damp or something like that.’

‘Of course there isn’t any damp. Bradwood would tell me immediately if there was anything like that. They were only recently redecorated.’

‘When?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Just before the war, I think. The same time as all the bedrooms. Bradwood would say if there was anything wrong. Why are you suddenly so interested in the staff bedrooms? You haven’t been interfering with the staff, stopping them getting on with their work, showing off, or anything, have you?’

‘No. Of course not. I just wondered.’

‘Much better off sleeping in a tent, anyway. Far better for the health,’ muttered his grandfather. ‘All this modern nonsense about hot-water bottles. Never had hot-water bottles in the trenches. Got along all right then, didn’t we?’

‘You know I only have one for my rheumatism, dear,’ said his grandmother.

‘Bah. Fresh air and exercise. Soon kill rheumatism. Never had a hot-water bottle in my life. Never had rheumatism either. Bound to get rheumatism if you have a damned hot-water bottle. Infernal things. . . .’

David sat thinking in the near-darkness of the sitting-room. The door opened and the lights were switched on. It was Jean, dainty and busy-looking in her parlour-maid outfit. She didn’t see him in the chair, and went straight towards the windows to draw the curtains, humming softly to herself.

David crept up behind her.

‘Boo,’ he said.

‘Oh! Don’t frighten me like that. You’re always jumping out on me. I didn’t think anyone was in here.’ She put one hand to her forehead. He put a hand on each of her shoulders.

She said, ‘I was going to write you a little note. To say good-bye. Put it in your room during dinner.’

‘Will you think of me at school, Jean?’

‘Of course, I will. Don’t get into any mischief now. When will you be back?’

‘August, I suppose. You’ll still be here, won’t you?’

‘Oh yes. Unless I get the sack. My holiday’s not till September.’

Here, look. I mustn't stop talking to you for too long. I've got to go down and get the dinner ready.'

'Can I kiss you goodbye, Jean?'

'What, *here*?'

'Yes.'

'Supposing -'

'No one's about now. Come on. Quick. Just one, a goodbye one.'

'But -' She looked quickly round the room.

'All right then, just one,' she said.

They put their arms round each other. . . .

There was the sound of a throat being cleared roughly. They split. His grandfather had come in quietly through the open door and was walking past them towards the fireplace. He did not look in their direction.

Jean busily finished drawing the curtains, David followed his grandfather embarrassedly towards the fireplace. The old man stopped and began filling his pipe, dropping shreds of tobacco on the floor. David, not knowing what else to do in the circumstances, bent down and picked up the shreds.

At length his grandfather spoke.

'Extraordinary letter in *The Field* this week. Chap in Perth says he found a grouse's egg in a partridge's nest. Extraordinary thing. Extraordinary thing. Known pheasant's eggs in partridges' nests here often. Never known a grouse do that before. Usually sensible birds, grouse. Not like pheasants. Damned idiots, pheasants. Especially hen pheasants. Bad mothers, too. No idea about bringing up children.' He lit a match and drew on his pipe.

David looked furtively round at Jean. She had drawn all the curtains. She grimaced at him, then grinned naughtily as she darted out of the door.

His grandfather said between puffs, 'Always used . . . to call . . . your Aunt Helen . . . "Hen Pheasant". Looked . . . exactly like one . . . Behaved . . . like one, too. Hadn't a brain in her head, poor girl. Kicked on the head by a heifer when she was six. Never recovered. Had to shut her up eventually. Thought she was Nell Gwyn. Passed on in '31. Best thing. Best thing. Going up to have a bath, what?'

'Yes, Grandpa.'

David left his grandfather muttering about the lack of

parental responsibility on the part of hen pheasants. He wondered whether the old man would tell his grandmother what he must have seen. He hoped not. She would be furious. It was the sort of behaviour that would seriously shock her. And Jean might get the sack.

His grandmother was on the landing at the top of the stairs.

'Don't be late for dinner now,' she said.

'No, I won't.'

She looked hard at him as he passed her.

'What *have* you got on your face?'

'Where?'

'On your mouth. It's all red.'

'Oh, nothing. It's a tooth bleeding,' he stammered and walked quickly on. He looked at himself in the mirror in his room: there were bright red smears on his mouth and upper lip. Why did Jean have to put on so much lipstick? She usually never wore any in her uniform. He picked up the flannel and soap and began rubbing.

'I just passed David on the stairs. He looked very guilty about something. Did he come from here?' his grandmother said.

'What? David? Oh yes. From here.'

'What was he doin?'

'Talking about hen pheasants. Said what bad mothers they were. Quite right too.'

'No, I mean when you came down?'

'When I came down? Sitting reading a book, messing about, I dunno. Said he'd read some letter in *The Field* that -'

'Was there anyone else in here with him?'

'Anyone else? What? Who? Said some fellow in Perth -'

'Are you sure he was alone?'

'What *are* you going on about? Anyway this fellow in Perth -'

'It's the most extraordinary thing.'

'Yes, I know. Never happened before to my knowledge.'

'How could it have happened?'

'Dunno. Suppose some damn-fool grouse thought the nest was hers and dropped -'

'What *are* you talkin' about, dear?'

'About that grouse's egg.'

'What grouse's egg?'

'The one in the partridge's nest. The one you were talking about.'

'I wasn't talkin' about a grouse's egg.'

'You said it was the most extraordinary thing.'

'No, I meant David.'

'David? What's extraordinary about him?'

'His face.'

'His face? Looks a perfectly good face to me.'

'No, I mean what was on it.'

'What was on it?'

'It was covered in red . . . all round his mouth.'

'Mouth?'

'Yes. He said he had a bleeding tooth, but it didn't look like blood.'

'Oh, yes. Bleeding tooth.'

'What, did he have it when he left the room then?'

'Bleeding tooth. Bleeding tooth.'

'Most odd. Are you *sure* he was alone in here, dear?'

'Most extraordinary thing. Must have thought it was its own nest and laid a damned egg in it. Expect it of a pheasant, not of a grouse. Damn-fool bird. Disgrace to its species.'

'I don't understand it. Looked just like lipstick.'

'Expect it of a pheasant. Never known it happen with a grouse.'

'Goodbye, Granny. Thank you so much for having me for so long. And sorry about the bath-water.'

'Oh, don't be stupid. That was nothing. Goodbye, David. Let us know when you'd like to come back. And take care on the train.'

'Yes, Granny. Thank you. I love being here.'

They were at the top of the front stairs. David embraced his grandmother. His grandfather had already gone down into the hall. David ran down the stairs.

His grandfather said, 'Got everything?'

'Yes, Grandpapa. I think so.'

'Good. Watch out on the cricket-field now. Where do you play

– wicket-keeper? Best place on the field. Watch out though. Don't want any more bleeding teeth, eh? Here.'

He pressed something into David's hand. It was a five-pound note.

'Thank you, Grandpapa. Thank you very much.'

'Nothing. Nothing. No more bleeding teeth, remember, eh?'

The old man turned to go back upstairs. David just heard him mutter as he went, 'Damned attractive girl. Damned attractive girl.'

'Hello, darling. Wonderful to see you.'

His mother kissed him with an 'Ummm' on both cheeks.

'Did you have a *marvellous* time?'

'Yes, thanks.'

They were walking along the platform to the taxi rank. She said eagerly, 'Any messages for me?'

'Who from?'

'Well, anyone down there.'

'No, not really.'

In the taxi she said, 'Now tell me *all* about her.'

'Who?'

'Elaine, of course. What's she like?'

'How do you mean?'

'Did you get on with her all right?'

'Yes. Charming.'

'Is she tall?'

'Normal height.'

'Attractive? Pretty, I mean?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'What did she talk about?'

'The usual things.'

'I mean she talked to you quite a lot, did she?'

'Yes.'

'Does she have any accent?'

'No.'

'Was she nice to you?'

'Very nice.'

'You didn't – you didn't find it difficult at all?'

'Why?'

'I don't know. I thought being so close to your father you might have - '

'No.'

'What's their house like?'

'Very nice.'

'What's she done to it?'

'Nothing much, yet.'

'But does she have any . . . any *taste*?'

'Why not?'

'Well, I mean, she's so *young*. What's she like with *him*?'

'Who?'

'Your father, silly.'

'All right.'

'Do they look . . . in love?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well do they touch each other and . . . and . . . ?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Did he seem happy?'

'Yes, very.'

'She understands him, you think?'

'Suppose so. Yes.'

'Did he mention . . . me at all?'

'No.'

'Does your grandmother like her?'

'Of course. Why not?'

'Well, she's a difficult woman to please where her sons are concerned.'

'How?'

'She never said anything about . . . about Elaine's past, I mean?'

'No.'

'Oh. Did Elaine talk about it at all?'

'No.'

'Never mentioned it?'

'No. Why should she?'

'Well - oh, it doesn't really matter. I just wondered what Granny thought about it.'

'Why?'

'Well, with her strong ideas. I would have *died* if she'd known

that about me. I mean, it's frightening enough *anyway* going to Combe as the bride of a favourite son. But with *that* behind her. . . .'

'With *what* behind her?'

'Well, Angela told me, Angela Baxbury – you know, she breeds poodles – *she* told me that Elaine had been married before. *And* had a child. And there was some *frightful* scandal. The child died of neglect or something. The husband was something awful like a bandleader. I really don't know. But I wondered if you'd *heard* anything, or if she'd *said* anything.'

'No.'

'But you can see why your father married her?'

'Oh yes.'

'Well, let's hope he knows what he's doing. I wrote to him but you know what he's like about writing letters. Never answered. Anyway, darling, you had *fun*, did you. I'm so glad. I missed you terribly. . . . What did she wear?'

'When?'

'When you saw her?'

'Trousers, mostly.'

'*Trousers?* At Combe?'

'Yes.'

'Did she paint her toenails?'

'Yes.'

'Good heavens! Things *have* changed. Since *my* day.'

Chapter 11

David did not go to Combe at all during the summer holidays that year. A week before the end of term he had been sent to the school doctor with recurrent pains in the stomach.

'You've got a grumbling appendix, my man,' was the diagnosis.

The final examinations that term were important for David. So, as the appendix was not serious, it was arranged that he would go into a London hospital on the first day of the holidays. This would allow the rest of the six weeks for recuperation.

One afternoon a few days after the operation his mother burst into the hospital room and said, 'Darling, some wonderful news for you.'

'What?'

'Paul Jenkins, Peter's father, wants you to spend three weeks on their boat with them. They've got a yacht for the holidays. It would be a wonderful chance to recover. Fresh air, terrific fun. Peter's going too. He suggested it. I said you'd simply love to. Aren't you excited?'

'But what about Combe?'

'Oh, darling, this is a chance in a lifetime. You can go to Combe any holidays. This would be *much* better for you after this operation. You must rest for a bit, you know, and I know you won't do that at Combe.'

'I could go to Combe after the yacht, couldn't I?'

'Yes, of course. If you want to. We'll see how you feel.'

'Peter's going to be there all the time, is he?'

'Yes. I don't know who else is going. But it's quite a big yacht, so they may have some others. Think what fun it will be. I envy you madly.'

'All right then. What about telling Granny, though?'

'I've done it. Wrote to her this morning explaining the whole thing.'

Ten days later, he met Peter Jenkins and his parents at Southampton station.

'Who else is coming?' he asked Peter in the car on the way to the docks.

'Oh, two friends of Daddy's, Mr and Mrs Lawton. And Polly. That's all.'

'Polly?'

'Polly Barchester-Fensdale. My cousin. You know, you met her on Speech Day last term. By the Pavilion.'

'In that funny hat with the flowers sticking out?'

'Yes, that's right. Daddy's niece.'

'Oh yes. How old?'

'About seventeen.'

'What's she like?'

'Oh, OK really. Not bad. Talks a bit too much. Mad about horses.' He lowered his voice so his parents in the front could not hear. 'I didn't ask her - Daddy did. But she needn't bother us, eh?'

'No. I should think not.' They grinned at each other knowingly.

David thought back to Speech Day. All he could remember was the flower hat, and a pair of long white gloves. The girl hadn't spoken a word to him: she had been too engrossed in the cricket-match to do more than shake hands disinterestedly.

The car drew up on a quay beside a long white yacht with *Mayflower* painted on its bows.

'This is it,' said Peter. 'Let me take your case. You're not meant to carry things after an appendix.'

They walked across the gang-plank on to the deck. A man with smooth grey hair and a long aquiline nose, in white shirt and grey flannel trousers, came out of a door in the middle of the yacht, followed by a short, round woman with yellow hair and oddly-shaped spectacles.

'This is David,' said Peter. 'David Melrose. Mr and Mrs Lawton.'

They shook hands.

A girl came out of the door a few yards behind them. She wore a dark-blue, sloppy fisherman's jersey and blue jeans stretched tight over generous buttocks. She was short, with mousy-coloured hair frizzed up round her neck, and a prominent nose that looked as if it was permanently sniffing for some unattractive smell. Her teeth were uneven, David noticed, as her mouth opened in a contrivedly welcoming smile.

'Oh, this is Polly, David,' said Peter Jenkins.

She held out a limp hand to David, then turned and said to Mrs Lawton, 'Smashing lot of grub laid in on this old ship. Going to stuff ourselves stupid, I'd say. As long as we can keep these greedy-guts boys away from the stores.'

In the warm breeze of a perfect August evening, the *Mayflower* slid into the harbour of Monte Carlo. As the yacht neared the jetty, a mixture of the harbour's noises reached the ears of everyone on deck.

Car engines, shouts, music from a café loudspeaker. Dirty barefoot children played on the quay cobble-stones: one small girl held a kitten in her arms as if it was a baby, and two small boys with sticks ran round taunting her, poking at the kitten.

The white and beige houses clambered up the mountainside like dolls' houses. A light on the highest ridge of all twinkled like an early star in the dusk.

David had heard people talk of Monte Carlo, but mainly in the context of a man having once broken a bank there. More often, he had imagined it as a medieval hill-top fortress, with a drawbridge and iron bars on the window-slits; but that was because he had read Dumas and imagined that Monte Carlo must be the same as Monte Christo.

'Isn't it beautiful?' he said to no one in particular.

Polly was leaning on the rail beside him. She said disdainfully, 'Beautiful? In a way, I suppose. But jolly unhygienic, I bet. Daddy says the French haven't learnt about lavatories yet: they use bidets. Things without plugs. Disgusting idea, don't you think?'

He had not known quite what to make of Polly during the cruise. Peter and he had set up a natural *entente* against her, planning their day's routine without reference to her, having their own private jokes together, comforted by the knowledge that she wouldn't understand the point of them and laughing all the louder because of it.

Peter took great pleasure in arguing with her on every conceivable issue, even on something as trivial as the naval jargon for various parts of the yacht, a subject on which she regarded herself, for some unknown reason, as something of an expert.

David couldn't be bothered to argue with her about anything.

He ignored her for the first two days. Then one morning when they had anchored off the coast of Spain, he was sitting on the deck watching the others swim around the yacht. He could not swim because of his appendix operation – ‘Whatever you do, darling, don’t swim,’ were his mother’s last words and, as it still gave him a twinge of pain to laugh, he had no intention of disobeying her – and he lazed in a deck-chair in the stern watching Peter’s parents, Peter and the Lawtons happily splashing round the boat.

‘What a swizz you not being allowed to swim.’ Polly was standing beside his chair. She was wearing a black one-piece bathing-dress and a plain white bathing-cap. Her hands were on her hips and she was dripping water on to the deck, having – to judge by her breathing – just swum energetically round the yacht.

David found himself for the first time examining her physically. Her legs were short and stocky, but sun-burnt and smooth; her thighs were fat, but the shining drops of sea-water that clung to them gave the brown flesh a new appeal. Instinctively, he compared her with Elaine and Jean – especially her breasts. . . .

‘Oh, I don’t mind really,’ he said. ‘It’s quite OK sitting here in the sun.’

‘What a wet thing to say.’ She shook some drips from her arm on to his face, and he closed his eyes.

‘Stop looking me up and down like that. I’m not some yearling at the Newmarket Sales,” she said. ‘Very bad manners to stare.’

She dived clumsily off the deck into the sea.

That evening in Monte Carlo they all had dinner at the Hotel Metropole. Between the soup and the main course, Mr Lawton said, ‘Well, if one of you two young chaps aren’t going to do your stuff and ask this attractive girl to dance, I’m going to. Polly – would you like to dance?’

‘Thanks awfully,’ said Polly, pushing back her chair.

Peter and David shared an embarrassed look. Neither of them had any intention of asking Polly to dance. If they had been on their own it might have been different. But under the searching eyes of the four grown-ups it was out of the question.

Mr Lawton had been paying a lot of attention to Polly on the cruise, flattering her looks, fetching towels for her after swimming, engaging her in conversation whenever he could. Mrs Lawton merely giggled when he came out with some remark like: 'If I were twenty years younger, cruising on a yacht with a beauty like you, Polly, I wouldn't be responsible for my actions, you know. But I mustn't talk like that in front of my lady wife. . . .'

Later, when Polly and Mr Lawton returned to the table and they had all finished their steaks, Mr Lawton said to his wife, 'Come on, darling. Let's have a spin round the floor. We'll show the young a step or two.'

'Why don't you and Polly dance, Peter?' said Mrs Jenkins. Peter rose reluctantly from his chair and looked at Polly.

'Dance then?'

'OK. As long as you don't tread on my corns,' said Polly.

David let out a sigh of relief at being exonerated. He had noticed how closely the Jenkins parents watched Polly and Mr Lawton, and he disliked the idea of being watched on the dance-floor himself. Especially with Polly.

Peter and Polly were walking back to the table.

'Mrs Jenkins, would you dance with me?'

'Oh, how gallant, David. Why should you want to dance with an old thing like me? Are you sure you wouldn't rather dance with Polly? She's coming back now. I'd quite understand.'

'No. I'd like to dance with you.'

Mrs Jenkins giggled.

'I *am* flattered. Come on then. I haven't danced for years, so you mustn't mind my steps.'

David and Mrs Jenkins did not so much dance together as walk in time, David holding her firmly at the maximum distance possible when one hand is held and the other is touching a partner's back. He felt most uncomfortable.

'Why don't you dance with Polly? She's an attractive girl.'

'Oh I don't know. I'll ask her later,' said David, looking at the band.

'Such a lively girl,' Mrs Jenkins went on. 'So unspoilt, too. Considering her father. Feminine, too - absolutely feminine. Usually girls who are so keen on horses get terribly horsey, almost tomboyish. But not Polly. I can see her causing quite a stir next

summer when she comes out. So much to say for herself. Just the sort of girl I'd love Peter to marry. Make a wonderful wife. I expect your mother'd feel the same way, wouldn't she?'

'Yes, I expect she would,' said David with feeling.

David's fear that he would be expected to dance with Polly was allayed when they returned to the table and Mrs Jenkins said that now the grown-ups would go on to the Casino, and that the three 'children', being under twenty-one, had better go back to the yacht.

'Don't wait up for us,' said Mr Jenkins, as the two groups parted outside the hotel. 'We might be very late.'

Peter, Polly and David walked in silence down the hill, along the jetty and on to the yacht. Then turned to look up at the houses clustering above them.

'Not a bad dump, is it,' said Polly. 'I don't feel like going to bed yet. What shall we do?'

'Do?' said Peter. 'I'm off to bed, I know that. All that swimming this morning has worn me out.'

'Spoil-sport,' said Polly. 'Fancy wanting to go to bed now. I feel like *doing* something.'

'What exactly?' said Peter, irritably.

'*Anything*, I don't know. Exploring. Seeing what the Froggies get up to at night.'

'Well, I'm off to bed,' Peter announced firmly. He looked at David as he moved towards the companion way leading to the cabins: 'Coming?'

'Oh you can't *both* go,' said Polly. 'David, stay a minute. You can't go and leave me alone like this. David, you stay if he wants to push off to bed. Come on, be a sport.'

David looked at Peter in desperation. Polly gripped his arm. 'Just a minute - to keep me company.'

Peter said angrily, 'Well I don't care what you do. I'm off to bed.' He clattered down the ladder.

'I can't stay long,' said David.

'Why not, you old weed? You haven't been swimming, so there's no excuse for being tired or any tommy-rot like that. Anyway, healthy boys of your age shouldn't get tired. *I'm* not tired, so you shouldn't be.'

'What do you want to do, anyway?'

'Don't know really. Go for a jaunt round the streets. Just a short walk. See what goes on here.'

She propelled him towards the gangway. He said, 'No, honestly. It's too late.'

'Well, I'm going. And you can't let me go alone, a poor defenceless maiden in the streets of Monte Carlo at night. Anything might happen. And *you'd* be blamed for not protecting me. Come on, you old wet.'

'All right then. But only for a few minutes.'

'Don't think it's your company I want. It's only your protection among all these lecherous Froggie men that maraud about at night. If they think I'm with you, they won't try any nonsense, that's all. A purely practical measure. You look tough even if you aren't. And they won't know about your appendix scar.'

They walked along the jetty, across the main road into a back-street, lit by flashing signs outside the doors of bars and night-clubs.

'Why is Mr Lawton so nice to you?' said David.

'Simple, you muggins. He's after a job in Daddy's bank. You should have heard him when we were introduced. "You mean Sir Dermot's girl?" he said greasily. What a drip he is. He said something about Daddy while we were dancing. I said if he was a good fellow I might put in a good word for him with Daddy and he shrieked with laughter. Lawks, his hands were clammy. Ugh.'

'Why don't you try out some French boys?'

'All the girls at school go on about Frenchmen being such romantic types, but I really can't see what's so fascinating about them,' she said loudly, as a trio of dark-haired youths passed in the opposite direction.

A wolf-whistle came from one of the youths. All three were talking loudly, laughing, looking back over their shoulders at Polly.

'God, they're common,' she said. 'Imagine walking down Bond Street and that happening. I'd almost rather have Mr Lawton.'

'I should have thought you'd be flattered. A whistle shows they find you attractive.'

'I can do without that, thank you very much. Common - that's

all it is. Probably it's just because I happen to be rather better dressed than the sort of girls they're used to.'

She was wearing a flared white satin dress, with a pink shawl round her shoulders, and white satin high-heeled shoes.

As they passed the door of a house with a lit sign saying 'Club Mamba Ngir', a man and a dark girl came out arm in arm. The girl turned and put her arms round the man's neck. The couple merged into a hot embrace, kissing passionately.

'Don't stare,' said Polly.

David said, 'I'm not staring.' They walked on a few yards. Polly turned to watch the kissing couple.

'Now who's staring?'

'It's so vulgar. Have you ever seen anything like that? I mean, fancy doing it in the street.'

'They're probably in love.'

'Then they can go and do it out of the way somewhere. Disgusting, doing it in public like that.'

'They might be married.'

'Married? That's even worse. They can do all that behind closed doors. Anyway it's a pretty revolting way to treat your wife.'

'What, kissing her you mean?'

'Well, like that. Almost animal. Like dogs in Hyde Park. I can just imagine what Daddy would say if he saw that going on.'

'I can't see much wrong in it. Quite natural.'

'*Natural?* I tell you, it's *animal*. Uncivilized. Farmyard stuff. Honestly, you must be a sex-maniac to think that's natural.'

'Don't be stupid. If I wanted to kiss someone badly enough, I wouldn't mind doing it in a dark street.'

'What, with people *seeing* you? You might just as well be a . . . monkey in the zoo.'

Polly was staring intently at the embracing couple. David said, 'Come on. We can't stand here like this.'

'Wait. Wait a minute. I want to see what they do.'

'Do? You've seen what they do. Kiss, that's all.'

'Yes, but when they've finished.'

'Well, they'll probably go home. We can't follow them there, can we.' He pulled her arm.

'No, no, wait a minute. You mean, they'll just stop and then go off quite normally?'

'I suppose so. What else could they do?'

'Well, kissing like that, they might. . . .'

The couple walked away arm in arm down the dark street.

'Let's follow them,' said Polly.

'Oh, don't be ridiculous. What for?'

'Just to see what happens.'

David tut-tutted. Polly broke into a trot to catch up with the couple before they turned off at the main road. When she reached the T-junction the couple had disappeared.

'Come on, back to the boat now,' he said in a bored voice.

'What do you think they're doing now?' said Polly as they reached the quay.

'Who?'

'That couple.'

'I really don't know. Probably kissing again.'

'Just kissing?'

'What else?'

'Well, what happens *after* kissing.'

'What does, then?'

'You know.'

'They could be, I suppose.'

'What - doing it? *That?*' There was a quaver in her voice.

'Why not?'

'Well. . . .'

They crossed the gangway to the *Mayflower's* deck.

'I'm off to bed now,' said David.

'OK. Thanks awfully for coming with me . . . these Froggies, honestly. Don't know how to behave at all, do they? What do you think they're doing now?'

'Who?'

'That couple.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake stop worrying about that couple. I'm off to bed. Good night.'

'Good night, David.'

David shared a cabin with Peter. He assumed Peter would be asleep, so he opened the door very quietly and undressed by the passage light without turning on the light in the cabin. He began

to think about the kissing couple. About the way they had kissed, the way they had moved together.

He hung up his shirt and was about to climb into his bunk when there was a soft knock on the cabin door. Polly was standing in the passage in white pyjamas.

'Sorry to bother you. But I can't open my port-hole. It's stuck. Could you help me?'

David nodded and closed the cabin-door behind him. He followed her to her cabin, his bare feet squeaking on the lino floor. He wore only his pyjama trousers – the night was too hot to wear the complete suit.

She pointed to the port-hole: 'I've tried but I can't move it.'

To reach the brass handle effectively he had to kneel up on her bunk, gripping the handle of the port-hole with both hands. He pulled hard. Nothing moved.

He pulled again: still no movement.

'Here, don't strain your scar. Let me pull too.' She knelt on the bunk beside him, her fingers over his on the handle. They pulled together: still no movement. Then suddenly the port-hole jerked open, and they both fell backwards on the bunk.

Polly burst out laughing, and David laughed too. Their heads were side by side on the pillow. David felt the warmth of her body through the pyjamas. Her bare shoulder touched his own bare chest. She was laughing uncontrollably. He could see the dark circles of her nipples through the white material.

He stretched his left arm over her body, raised himself on his right elbow and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed in laughter, her thighs shook against his. Her nearness excited him, even if her face did not.

'Oh, how funny!' she gurgled, opening her eyes. 'You looked so funny struggling like that. What are you doing now, over me like this?' The laughter in her eyes turned to sharpness.

'Nothing.'

'Oh you did look mad.' Then with urgency: 'Here – get off me. What on earth do you think you're doing? Get off me.'

He bent his head so that his mouth touched hers. She pouted in antipathy and began wriggling out from under him. His lips followed her mouth as she moved away. There was a sound like

that a child makes with its lips, wet, like a raspberry. Her arms came up and pushed him away from her.

'Get away from me,' she hissed. 'Get away, get away. What are you doing, you foul beast?' He knelt up on the bunk.

'How *dare* you behave like that?' she said, adjusting her hair, getting up from the bunk and standing well away from him. 'What are you, anyway? Some filthy uncivilized Frog?'

'I only tried to kiss you.'

'Well, *don't*. Don't *ever* try to kiss me. That man in the street must have put some filthy ideas into your head. Just don't ever think I'm the same as one of those French girls. Honestly, you're no better than an animal. Now get out of my cabin. And don't ever dare touch me like that again.'

'Sorry.' He moved towards the door.

'I should think so too. *Animal*.'

She closed the door behind him. He heard the bolt pushed roughly into place.

Chapter 12

On the day the autumn term ended, David met his mother in London. He was on his way to Combe. After the yacht trip in the summer holidays he had been unable to go to Combe after all: when he arrived his mother said, 'Granny's in bed with some virus and thought perhaps it wouldn't be too good an idea if you went there. Your father's staying away somewhere, too, otherwise you could have gone to him. But it's better, darling, I think, if you simply take it easy here with me till Glazebrook.'

So, reluctantly, he spent the remaining ten days at Sunningdale. Which had made him all the more determined to go straight to Combe when the Christmas holidays came.

In the taxi to Paddington his mother said, 'Oh, darling, I've got a surprise for you. Remember your wonderful time on the yacht with the Jenkins? Well, I thought somehow one simply *must* try to repay them. I thought of all *sorts* of ways. But in the end I wrote to Granny explaining the whole thing and asked her if she'd have Peter to stay there after Christmas. You'd *love* that, wouldn't you?'

'But Peter might not want to -'

'Don't be silly. He'd love it there. For a week. Anyway, it's all fixed.'

'Peter never said anything to me about it. I only left him this morning.'

'He doesn't know yet. They're keeping it as a surprise for him. I expect he'll telephone you there. Darling, isn't it *thrilling* for you? I always worry about you being lonely up there, with no one of your own age.' She gave a dry laugh. 'Except Elaine, of *course*.'

In the train David pondered over the plan. Peter was his closest friend: he was very fond of him. But Peter fitted into the Glazebrook-Sunningdale part of his life, not into the Combe part. He wanted to keep Combe utterly separate, and now Peter would dilute the separateness. He wished his mother would *not* cook up these plans without talking to him first: she just charged on, imagining she was doing the right thing, full of good intentions,

but invariably she caused far more problems than if she had done nothing. So interfering always – other mothers didn't seem to interfere as much as she did.

In the excitement of arrival at Combe after nine months of absence he forgot about his mother and her plans. Then after all the usual questions his grandmother said, 'Your mother wrote askin' us –'

'Yes, I know. She told me today.'

'You didn't know before then?'

'No. Nor did Peter.'

'Really she *is* extraordinary. She said you had suggested she should write to us. Still the same Cynthia. Just as your father said. Could never believe a word she said. No, I don't mean that, David, I didn't mean that at all. It's simply that she seems to get the oddest ideas into her head and then starts believing them.'

'When's he coming then?'

'On the 28th for a week. I hope someone tells us in good time what train they're catching to save poor Chancellor being hauled out at short notice to meet them.'

'*Them?* What do you mean, *them?*'

'The boy and the girl.'

'What girl?'

'The Jenkins boy and his cousin. The one you got to know in the summer on that boat, your mother said. Some long complicated name. Grandpa looked it up in *Who's Who* to see she was all right. Wait – I'll get the letter.'

'Polly Barchester-Fensdale?'

'Yes, something like that. Yes, I think that was it.'

'Why on earth is *she* coming?'

'What do you mean, David? Your mother said you had met her on this boat trip and you'd like to have her to stay here but wondered if we could manage both her and the boy. Grandpapa looked her up and she seemed all right, so we said yes. Don't pretend you didn't know, David. It's so silly tryin' to take me in like that.'

'Granny, I promise I didn't know. Mummy never mentioned her. She said about Peter but not about *her*.' He shouted at the top of his voice: '*Christ why does she have to stick her bloody nose into everything?*'

‘David, if you talk like that you will leave the room immediately. I won’t have you shouting like that, using that filthy language in front of Grandpapa.’ His grandmother spoke sharply.

‘Fellow’s dead right if you ask me,’ muttered his grandfather. ‘Sticks her bloody nose into everything.’

It was late on the night of 27 December, the night before Peter and Polly were due to arrive. David and Jean Holmes lay together on the bed in the spare-room. They had met there every night except Christmas night, when Jean had said she would be too tired.

‘Why didn’t you come back in the summer, as you said you would?’ she had asked the first night. ‘I heard you had an operation, appendix, wasn’t it? I thought you’d come up here to recover.’

‘I was going to. Then my grandmother had this illness and I couldn’t come. I went on a boat-trip round the Mediterranean.’

‘Lucky so-and-so. Tell me about it.’

He had told her all the places he had visited, but had never mentioned Polly.

Now she suddenly said, ‘Who’s this girl coming tomorrow?’

‘How did you know?’

‘Well, she’s sleeping in this room, isn’t she? Mr Bradwood said to make up the bed for her tomorrow morning.’

‘Oh, she’s some girl my mother asked.’

‘Your mother? Why?’

‘Oh I don’t know. Hardly know her.’

‘Have you met her?’

‘Yes.’

‘When, in the summer?’

‘Yes. My mother thought I should repay the hospitality of the people who owned this boat.’

‘What, she was on the boat, was she?’

‘Yes.’

‘You never told me that.’

‘I’d forgotten about her really. She’s awful.’

‘She’s got some awful name, anyway. Mr Bradwood said, but for the life of me I couldn’t remember it. Why’s she in the room next to you?’

'I don't know. My grandmother fixed that.'

'What does she look like?'

'Awful. Dumpy, boring. She's awful. Let's stop talking about her.'

'But why's she coming here?'

'I told you. My mother fixed it. Nothing to do with me.'

'Seems funny to me. You mean, you don't want her here?'

'I'll say I don't. Now, Jean, please let's forget her.'

'Well, we won't have anywhere to meet till she's gone, will we?'

'I can see you somewhere else, can't I?'

'Where?'

'Some other room.'

'No - we'll just have to wait till she's gone. What's the boy like?'

'Peter? He's fine. My best friend at school.'

'Is he keen on her then?'

'No. He's her cousin.'

'What a funny arrangement! Fancy your mother fixing all that. Well, see you don't start meeting her in here instead of me, now.'

'Don't be crazy, Jean. . . .'

He kissed her with an angry passion. The cycle of caresses began.

'You really should have gone to meet them with Chancellor,' said his grandmother. 'It would have been more polite. They're your guests, after all.'

'Peter is. *She* isn't,' said David angrily.

'Oh, don't be stupid. She sounds perfectly harmless. You're not to be rude to her, it would be so embarrassing.'

'She's a crasher of a bore if ever there was one.'

'Nonsense. I expect she's perfectly charming. Should be, anyway, with that upbringing.' She addressed his grandfather. 'Didn't you know a Barchester-Fensdale in your regiment, dear?'

'What? Who?'

'You said there was a Barchester-Fensdale in your regiment.'

'Old Splosh? Yes, fine fellow. Got a mention at Gallipoli. Only bad thing about him was his feet.'

'His feet, dear?'

‘Yes. Never washed his socks. Stunk like a polecat.’

‘That was her grandfather, I expect. You won’t mention his feet in front of *her*, will you, dear?’

‘Why not? Everyone in the regiment knew.’

‘It might embarrass her dreadfully. David, *you’re* not to, either.’

‘Course I won’t. In fact, I doubt if I’ll address one word to her.’

‘Don’t be so childish. Really, do remember your age now.’

They were waiting for the two guests to arrive before going in to lunch. There was a sound of voices outside the door. Bradwood entered and said grandly, ‘Miss Barchester-Fensdale and Mr Jenkins.’

The sight of Polly gave David such a shock that he forgot all about making the introductions. He remembered her as gawky, dumpy, frizzy-haired, tomboyish, heavily dressed, flat-footed, clumsy. The creature that came through the door ahead of Peter was still dumpy, but dumpy in a very different sort of way. Gone was the frizz on her head: in its place, long straight hair nearly to her shoulders. Gone the bright scarlet lipstick she had smeared on liberally in the evenings on the yacht: instead, no lipstick at all, no rouge, pale cheeks. Her eyes were heavily outlined in black, giving her an almost ghostly look.

She wore a crimson sweater that must have been at least two sizes too small for her and accentuated her full, rather droopy bosom. Her black skirt was equally tight, creased across her stomach from sitting in the train. Red high-heeled shoes with long pointed toes graced her large, splayed-out feet. She walked towards his grandmother with exaggerated poise.

‘Come on, David: introduce us then,’ said his grandmother with a nervous giggle.

‘Oh, sorry. This is Polly—Granny.’

‘How do you do. We are so pleased you could come.’

‘Thanks awfully for asking me,’ said Polly effusively.

‘Polly – Grandpapa.’

‘Used to know a Barchester-Fensdale at Gallipoli,’ said his grandfather, shaking her hand.

David was so riveted by Polly’s metamorphosis that he forgot about Peter.

His grandmother's voice came from behind him: 'How do you do, Peter. David's so hopeless about introducin' people. Did you have a good journey?'

'How do you do. Yes, thanks. Very good,' said Peter shyly.

'*Ciao*, old thing,' said Polly to David with an inane grin, as Peter shook hands with the old man.

'What?' said David.

'Her new word from Florence,' explained Peter. 'She uses it the whole time. Showing off she's been to Italy.' They all laughed nervously except his grandfather who said, '*Ciao*? What's that? Kind of dog, isn't it?'

'No,' said Polly. 'It's Italian for "wotcher", "hi", sort of thing.'

'Wotcher? Hi?' His grandfather looked nonplussed.

Polly went on, 'You know. Modern for "hello" type of thing.'

'I can never keep up with all this modern slang they use these days. So confusin', all those American expressions,' said his grandmother, interpolating quickly before the old man let out an oath. 'Let's go straight in to lunch. David can show you your rooms afterwards.'

Florence! thought David. Of course - now he remembered: Polly had said in the summer she was going to Florence for three months, to learn about art or sculpture or something, to help her for her coming-out season next year: though why she thought a knowledge of art would help her cut the cake at Queen Charlotte's Ball or whatever they did, David had not understood. He had said as much. 'Not for Queen Charlotte's, stupid,' she had answered disdainfully. 'Broaden the mind and all that, make one a dazzling dinner-table conversationalist, etc.'

He gripped Peter's arm as they followed the women towards the dining-room. "Hello, old sod," he whispered. 'God, I wouldn't have recognized her. Arse's still as huge, I see, though.'

'You should have heard her on the train. I got the lot. Don't wonder her arse is that size, judging by the number of Italians she says pinched it. Should think it'll be permanently swollen to twice its normal size.'

'You mean she allowed them to pinch her arse?' David remembered the scene with the jammed port-hole.

'Allowed them? I'd say she went round offering it for pinching purposes. She's a very changed girl, is our Polly, I can tell you. You just wait: you'll hear it all, I bet.'

At lunch, David became more and more irritated at everything Polly said. She had already got on to the subject of Florence and was explaining to his grandmother the curriculum for English girl 'finishing' there.

'About eight of us, there were,' she said, through a mouthful of roast lamb. 'Sally Bocker, Penelope Skinch-Smith, Daphne Mellington - do you know any of them? I'm sure you do. Daphne lives somewhere down here, I think.'

'Do we know a Daphne Mellington?' his grandmother asked his grandfather.

'Mellington? Probably old Hugo's girl. Terrible fellow. Anti-blood sport. Blackballed him at White's in the old days. Couldn't hold his drink. Terrible fellow.'

Polly continued quite unperturbed, 'Well, Daphne's a tremendous girl. Kept us all in fits. Dressed up as a priest one night, and the old Contessa who ran the *pensione* thought a man had got in through . . .'

'Sounds just like Hugo,' interrupted his grandfather. 'Always did things in bad taste. Bad taste.'

His grandmother said, 'Do tell us more about Florence. It sounds fascinatin'.'

Polly started a long story about Sally Bocker fainting in an art gallery because she had sneaked out the previous night to meet a married Italian count in a night-club. His grandmother's eyes grew wider and wider. Peter and David exchanged conspiratorial glances and hid their laughter behind napkins.

'Is it a new thing goin' to Florence? In my day, we were never allowed abroad on our own like that,' his grandmother said to Polly.

'Knew a chap called Barchester-Fensdale at Gallipoli,' blared his grandfather. 'Probably your grandfather. Splosh, we called him.'

'Oh yes,' said Polly. 'He's pretty ga-ga now, I think.'

'What did he do at Gallipoli, Grandpapa,' said David.

'Do? Same as the rest of us. Shot up the old Turk. Got a mention. Dunno what for.'

'But what was he mainly known for?' David persisted.

His grandmother threw a furious look at him. She said hastily, Polly, do tell us more about Florence.'

'Known for?' said his grandfather. 'Never washed his socks. Stunk like a polecat.'

'What was the food like in Florence?' said his grandmother.

'Standing orders you had to wash your socks every day. Splosh could never be bothered to take off his boots. Saw his point, mind you. Damned nuisance. But one couldn't stand in the same trench as Splosh in the end. Used to call him our secret weapon against the Turk. Any Turk advancing to within a hundred yards of those feet would have waved a white flag.'

'Are you going back to Florence?' said his grandmother desperately.

At the end of lunch, as they were walking out of the dining-room, Polly took David's arm and said, '*Ciao*, handsome.'

Something made him look round over his shoulder as he flinched in embarrassment. Jean had come into the dining-room to help Bradwood clear the table. She was watching him. Their eyes met: she turned away and began stacking the dirty plates noisily.

Some days later David went upstairs to his room earlier than usual to change for dinner. His door was open and his light on. Jean was drawing his curtains. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

'I've been trying to talk to you for days,' he said.

'Oh, have you?' She didn't look at him.

'You know I have. You've deliberately avoided me. Every time I've tried to catch your eye, you've looked away.'

'Oh, have I?'

'Yes. Jean, what's wrong with you?'

'Nothing.'

'Don't be silly. There is something, isn't there? What have I done?'

'Nothing.'

'Jean, please.' He moved towards her across the room and put out a hand to touch her arm.

'Don't you dare touch me.'

'Jean, what's wrong? I wanted to say we could meet again in a few nights' time, like we used to. When they're gone.'

'Oh, you did, did you?'

'Jean, please. What's wrong with you? Why are you like this?'

'Oh, nothing.'

She still had not looked at him.

'Jean, have I done something?'

'No. Not really.'

'Yes, I must have. What?'

'Nothing.'

'Please stop saying "nothing".'

'You know perfectly well what you've done.'

'I don't. I promise I don't.'

'Well, you must take me for a bigger fool than I look, then.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know perfectly well what I mean.'

'Jean, stop, please. I don't know what you mean. If I did, I wouldn't be asking you.'

'You thought you could get away with it, no questions asked, didn't you?'

'Get away with what?'

'Oh, stop playing the innocent with me. Get away with *HER*.'

'Who?'

'*HER*. Her next door.' She pointed to the spare-room. 'You think I'm blind or something? Or just plain stupid.'

'What do you mean, *her*? What about her? She's ghastly. I told you, I didn't want her here in the first place.'

'Expect me to believe that? I've seen her, almost every meal, taking your arm, calling you "handsome", looking at you all the time. I've seen her. Her with her smart clothes and posh accent.'

'Jean, please. I can't stand that girl.'

'Then why did you fix for her to be in the room next to yours, then? Odd, isn't it? Convenient, isn't it?'

'I didn't fix anything -'

'Oh, don't give me that patter. Don't play the innocent with me.'

'Jean, honestly, you're getting things all wrong -'

'Look, I don't care any more what's wrong and what's right.'

I've served my purpose, and that's that. If you think I'm going to make myself nice and available again after she's gone, just so as you can fill in time till you see *her* again, you're wrong, Mr Bloody Melrose. It was my fault, I don't mind admitting it. I should have heeded what my mother said. But I thought you were different – now I know you're not. Oh, I don't blame you too much – I blame myself for being taken in. I should have known better. But from now on, I'm sticking to my sort and you can stick to yours.'

'Jean –'

'Look.' She thrust out her left hand. On the fourth finger was a small ring with one tiny diamond in an ornate setting. 'Look at that.'

She looked at his face for the first time.

'It's Alec. I've said I'll marry Alec in the summer. At least you know where you stand with him. And don't bother to waste your time talking to parlour-maids any more, Mr Melrose.'

She marched out of the door and closed it firmly behind her.

David put his head between his hands.

'Christ, Christ, *Christ*,' he said quietly. 'That mother of mine . . . interfering busybody of a BITCH. . . .'

David picked *The Code of The Woosters* off his bedside table. After half a page, he closed the book with a snap, and lay back, his hands between his head and the pillow, staring at the ceiling.

He had not spoken a word during dinner except when directly addressed, and then answering only in grunts.

'David, are you feeling all right, tonight? Not caught a chill or anything, have you?' his grandmother asked.

'No. It's nothing.'

'You're so silent, I thought there might be something the matter with you.'

'Cheer up, *signor*,' said Polly, slapping him on the back. 'Probably dead depressed we're going tomorrow, that's all.'

His grandmother laughed. After coffee, his grandfather was showing Peter the old Combe game-books, reminiscing about 'the big days we had in the old days'. Polly was asking his grandmother about the year she had been a *débutante*.

'Of course you hadn't been abroad, so you probably didn't

think Englishmen were such a lot of drips when *you* came out. How many proposals did you have during your season?’

‘How could I remember, it’s so long ago,’ said his grandmother with a weak giggle, throwing David a look that spoke acute distaste. It was the kind of question she considered in bad taste: ‘so vulgar talkin’ about boy-friends as they all seem to nowa-days,’ David had heard her say once.

Polly, too insensitive to notice his grandmother’s discomfort, pressed on with more questions. David quietly moved towards the door, whispering to Peter as he passed, ‘I’m off to bed. See you in the morning.’ Peter nodded but could not answer: he was listening earnestly to the old man tell one of his favourite shooting stories about some day in ’31 when ‘old Horace Chatsworth dropped his spectacles out after snipe and peppered some prize heifer in the udder and Frankie Brushworth got an udder out of some butcher and had it brought in during dinner on a silver salver. . . .’

David had heard the story often before. So had his grandmother – much to her disgust.

Now he lay in bed and angrily considered the unexpected repercussion of his mother’s inviting Polly to Combe: no more meetings with Jean. Blast her interference, blast both of them. He thought about Jean: she must have been fonder of him than he imagined, to take offence like that, to get engaged to Alec James when she had always pooh-poohed Alec’s attentions and treated him – according to her, anyway – as no more than a useful social contact who could chauffeur her around. ‘Better than bicycling any day,’ she always said, laughing unconcernedly when he insisted that her nights-out with Alec must mean she was more attached to Alec than she admitted. ‘It’s not so much Alec – it’s his Ford Prefect I go for.’ It was always Jean who said, ‘No point in me getting any fancy ideas about you, David. I wouldn’t be seen with you, honest I wouldn’t. I’d never be able to hold my face up again: Think what everyone would say. Little Miss Flighty, getting ideas above herself. I can just hear them. I’ve told my mother about you, though.’

‘How?’

‘Oh, you needn’t worry. Nothing about meeting in here. Just describing you, saying how nice you are, sort of different

to all the others. She asked about you on my holiday, teased me a bit, came out with all the usual stuff about knowing my place and that.'

'Knowing your place? That's all nonsense. You could marry anyone you wanted to, Jean, whoever they were.'

'I could, maybe, but I wouldn't want to. Mother's right, even though I laugh at her. We all have our place.'

'Nonsense. Your place is where you want it to be.'

'Well, I know where I want mine to be. And it's not in some museum like this, I can tell you.'

As David thought over their conversations, he resented more and more the prospect of no more meetings with Jean – if she had really meant what she said. Quite apart from the physical delight she offered, apart from the harmony of their bodies, he had found in Jean a warmth, a comfort, and an understanding he had found with no other woman. He had told her secrets he would not have told even Peter. He trusted her. In a way he loved her, he supposed, but he was not in love with her, he knew that. She had said a hundred times she was not going to fall in love till she was twenty-one; yet now she was engaged, so she said. He hoped Alec James was worthy of her. He began to hate Alec James even more than he had done already.

Footsteps outside in the passage. Polly's voice said 'Good night.' His door opened after a knock and his grandmother said, 'Feelin' all right, David? You don't want an aspirin or anything?'

No thanks, Granny. I'm OK. Just a bit tired.'

'You aren't upset about anything?'

'No, no.'

'I should get some sleep then. Shall I turn off the light?'

'No, thanks. I will in a minute.'

'Good night, David.'

'Good night, Granny.' She closed the door softly. He went on thinking about Jean and Alec James.

Twenty minutes later, another knock on his door. A quiet little knock, unlike his grandmother's. Peter?

'Come in.'

It was Polly.

'Ciao, it's me. Can I come in?'

'Why? What for?'

'I want to talk to you for a minute.'

'What about? Can't it wait till tomorrow?'

'Not really. Just a minute or two.' She closed the door and came over to the end of his bed. She was wearing fluffy slippers and a floral silk dressing-gown. Her eyes were still made-up, her hair recently brushed.

'What do you want to talk about?'

'Just talk. That room gets a bit spooky, you know. It's a spooky house, I think.'

'It's not at all spooky. It's very friendly.'

'You probably know it very well. I don't. Gives me the willies at night.'

'What do you want to talk about?'

'You *are* grumpy this evening. What's happened to you? Got gout like your grandfather?'

'Don't be idiotic. Look, come on. I want to go to sleep in a minute.'

'OK, OK, *bambino*. I won't deprive you of your beauty sleep.'

'Well, come on then. Speak now, then go, and for ever hold your peace.'

'God, you're grumpy. Typically English. Only an English boy would be so rude to a girl coming into his bedroom at night.'

'Look, if I want a girl in my bedroom at night, I'll ask her, see? If she just barges in uninvited -'

'I didn't barge in. I knocked politely. And you said "Come in", didn't you, grumpy?'

'Well, I didn't know it was you. Come on, stop wasting time. What do you want?'

'Can I sit down?' Without waiting for his answer she perched on the end of the bed, squashing his feet as she sat down. 'Sorry,' she said as he moved them roughly out from under her. He closed his eyes to show his boredom.

'David, remember that night in Monte Carlo?'

He knew exactly which night, but he said, 'Which night in Monte Carlo? There were three nights.'

'I know, but *our* night - the night you took me out walking in the streets.'

'No.'

'You don't remember at all?'

'No.'

'Well, I do. I remember every bit of it. And I just wanted to tell you I've - I've changed a lot since then.'

'So what? Haven't we all?'

'You don't remember my port-hole getting stuck?'

'No.'

'Well, my port-hole got stuck and I had to get you to open it. We fell on the bunk, remember? And you, you dirty old Romeo, tried to kiss me. Don't you remember?'

'I remember the port-hole getting stuck -'

'Well you tried to kiss me on the bunk. And I was the frigid old professional English virgin and sent you packing off with a flea in your ear, don't you remember?'

'No.'

'Oh good. Well, that's a relief. I thought that's maybe why you've been so grumpy with me. I've changed a lot since then.'

'You said that already.'

'Yes, but you don't understand. I wouldn't behave like that now. Florence changed all that.'

'Oh did it?' His voice was cold, bored.

'Yes. It was like . . . a new world. I couldn't believe it possible. I must tell you about Florence, then you'll understand.'

He pointedly turned on his side, eyes firmly closed, and gave a long sigh.

'We were all in this *pensione* under this Contessa, you see. The others had all been there some time before I arrived. But I soon got into the swim of things. The whole point of the place was not the art galleries and sculpture and things. Frankly, I wasn't looking forward much to all that anyway, missing the cubbing and everything. But Mummy said I *had* to go, otherwise I would never have gone within a hundred miles of Florence. The whole point of the place was the *men*. They were gorgeous. I was a bit shocked at first when I got on a bus and one's bum was simply black and blue after three minutes, but Sally Bocker told me mums sent their daughters to Florence not for art and things but to learn about men. The mums realized the weeds who do the London season are crashingly wet but they're obviously the only husbands available, and if one doesn't whoop it up beforehand one'll go badly off the rails afterwards, when one's Lady

So-and-So with three children. Purely because of sex. So I realized what a cunning old thing Mummy must be – I mean, she's always said I must marry someone who could afford to keep a whole regiment of hunters, own stables and things. So I saw the light. Sally introduced me to this *gorgeous* young man called Peppino. He had a small motor-bike thing and I used to nip out of the *pensione* every afternoon pretending to be going with Sally to a museum or something, and Peppino would whizz me off to a heavenly wood of cypress trees. It was the only thing to do. One couldn't be a spoil-sport and let down the English side, could one? Anyway, Peppino kept pinching my bum the whole time and I kept trying to get him into conversation, which was difficult because he only knew two words of English. Then one afternoon he pounced on me and before one could say Jack Robinson his hand was *in* my shirt. He was so *strong*! I struggled but his hand kept fishing about in my bra. Then I suddenly thought, "Oh jimminy cricket, what the hell" and gave up the struggle. It was extraordinary, the feeling. Anyway, I told Sally and she gave me a long lecture on what to do and from then on it was every afternoon with Peppino. If one's not going to be able to enjoy it in England, *ever*, according to Sally, well, I mean, what the hell? Might as well while there's no complications like divorce, etc., etc. Then that bloody Peppino jilted me. I don't know why. One afternoon he didn't turn up. I'd got mildly keen on him, in a purely animal sort of way. But Sally said not to bother about one fish in the sea etc., etc., plenty more where he came from. So I more or less left it to her, and honestly, it didn't seem to matter *who* she produced, they were all just as clued-up as Peppino. I didn't really care in the end as long as they looked reasonably *manly*. Then a crew of American sailors came to Florence and the joy of talking the same language, although they weren't quite as hot stuff as the Italians . . . am I boring you? Anyway, what I mean by all this is I realize how silly and English I was in Monte Carlo and . . . David, are you listening to me?'

He grunted, eyes closed.

'I thought you'd gone to sleep. Anyway, I just want to say I wouldn't behave in the same way now. I was so pleased when I got back and heard you'd asked me to stay. You're the only

Englishman who's ever . . . shown any feelings towards me at all. I was so pleased and hoped being asked here -'

'I didn't ask you. My mother did.'

'What do you mean? Your mummy wrote to Mummy and said *you* wanted me to stay.'

'It wasn't true.'

'Oh, David, come off it. Why pretend?' 'C'

'I'm not pretending -'

'I was so excited. Yet the whole time you've ignored me. I was sure when I had the room next to yours you'd come along and see me. I used to wait up for you. Didn't you hear me knocking on the wall?'

'No.'

'Well, I did. Every night. Perhaps it's too thick. Anyway, now it's my last night, so I came to you instead. I realized you might not know how much I'd changed, and things . . .'

He said nothing.

'David, I'm sorry about Monte Carlo. It must have been a frightful blow to your pride. I'm sorry - forget it. I'm a new Polly these days. In Florence the American sailors used to call me "Poll the Doll" . . . Doll means sort of a cute girl in American, they said . . . David, what I mean is, will you forget about Monte Carlo and can we start sort of afresh? David, are you awake?'

He grunted again.

'Do you still feel like you did in Monte Carlo? Like when you tried to kiss me?'

He made neither sound nor movement.

'David . . . now it's my turn. Now the boot's on the other foot. David, say something. Look at me, do *something*.'

'Why?'

'Do you just want to humiliate a girl? Out of revenge? Do you often have girls of eighteen coming into your bedroom, flinging themselves at your feet? I know you're handsome, tremendous sex appeal and all that. But has it happened so damn often that you just lie there bored stiff with the whole thing?'

'Don't be stupid. Look, I'm tired. Now you've said your piece, I should go back to your room.'

'David, kiss me again.'

He sensed her lean forward on the bed, but he kept his eyes closed.

'David, give me your hand.' Her hand burrowed under the bedclothes until it touched his. He held his hand tightly clenched, refusing to allow her to twist it open. She moved her hand over his thigh. He grabbed her hand, squashed it brutally, hurled it out from under the bedclothes.

'Don't,' he snarled, eyes still closed.

The springs creaked as she rose from the bed. There was a rustling noise next to his left ear.

'David? . . . David, *please*.'

'What?' he said angrily.

'David . . . look at me.'

'Why?'

'*Please*.'

He lay still.

'David, look at me. Just once. Just once, then I'll go if you want me to.'

He made a grimace, opened his eyes.

She was standing beside the head of the bed, naked. Her dressing-gown lay in a heap at her feet. Her back was arched, so her stomach and breasts stuck out towards him, just above his face. Her right hand was under her right breast, her left between her legs, half-hiding the clump of dark curly hair level with his head, a foot away. Her eyes shone, her mouth hung open.

He closed his eyes in disgust. Coldly, unemotionally: 'For Christ's sake get the hell out of my room and find yourself a candle, you fat cow.'

He heard the rustle as she put on her dressing-gown. She spat: 'God I loathe you. I should have known all the time what you really were. A typically dull, sexless Englishman. No, you're worse than that. You must be. I know what *you* are. You're a pansy. A filthy, filthy pansy.' She slammed the door. A Thorburn picture of a woodcock in flight fell off the wall with a crash.

David laughed out loud as he picked up the pieces of glass.

His mother met him at the station. As usual, the kiss on both cheeks, the 'ummmms' and the battery of questions.

'Why didn't you tell me you'd asked Polly as well?'

'Oh, didn't I, darling? I meant to. I must have thought she would have told you herself.'

'How?'

'Well, in a letter.'

'She's never written to me in her life.'

'Hasn't she? Well I simply assumed you'd know already. Her mother said she could go ages ago.'

'But she was in Florence till a few days before Christmas.'

'I know. But her mother wrote and told me she'd had a letter from Polly in early December, I think, saying she'd *love* to go.'

'Well, I just wish you'd told me. I looked an awful fool when she appeared out of the blue.'

'Anyway, I'm sure it was a success, wasn't it, darling? She sounds such an ideal girl. Nell Jenkins told me you were both absolutely *inseparable* on the yacht -'

'What do you mean? She's a frightful girl.'

'Darling, I don't want to interfere. But please never feel shy at asking my advice about your girl-friends or anything like that in the future. I'm always there to help, ask them to stay, anything like that. I don't want to butt in on your business, never think *that*. But I'm always *there* to help. And she'd be so suitable.

'Why?'

'Don't you realize, darling? She's Dermot's only child, and he's worth an absolute fortune, his bank and so on. And she'll get the *lot*. And she's not Roman Catholic or anything complicated like that. Anyway, she sounds an attractive, simply *charming* girl. Of course, I know you're both young yet. But if you ever brought Polly Barchester-Fensdale home to see me as your bride, believe me, darling, I'd be *thrilled*. Yes, you could do a lot worse than Polly Barchester-Fensdale. I always thought you'd have good taste in women. If I've taught you one thing in life, I hope it's that - to pick the right woman. And if you make a start, even a *start*, with Polly -'

'She's awful.'

‘Don’t be silly, darling. I’ve asked her to stay for the Easter holidays. You won’t be going to Combe for the whole five weeks, will you?’

‘Yes, I will. I wasn’t, but now I am.’

‘Oh dear. Always the same when you get back from Combe. Spoilt, ill-mannered, bloody-minded. . .’

Chapter 13

It was the last day of the Easter term at Glazebrook. The final placings had just been read out in Memorial Hall. Top of the school: Melrose D. which made him 'Head of the School' for the summer term.

When David returned from Memorial Hall to his house, there was a note in the rack for him: 'Please see me immediately - A.S.-B.'

He knocked on the door of Squitters' study.

'Come in. Ah, Melrose,' said Aubrey Squires-Birch. 'Come in and sit down. I wish to talk to you at some length.'

David sat down in the tattered arm-chair and waited for the housemaster to go through his ritual of choosing a pipe from the rack. Squires-Birch sat down opposite:

'Now Melrose. Or rather David, as I will be calling you from now on. I have just heard the final placings and you are, I hear, Head of the School next term. Many congratulations - it is indeed a fine effort. It is a long time since I had the Head of the School in my house.'

He paused to light the pipe he had been filling.

'And,' he spoke between puffs, 'you are also the best classical scholar I have ever had in my house. Knowing my lifelong affinity with the classics, you must appreciate what pleasure your academic achievements give me. If you cast your mind back to the time when you were considering in which field you should specialize after School Certificate, you will recall your initial wish to specialize in General subjects. In other words, as I said at the time, to specialize in nothing. To take the easy way out. I now feel justified in exerting a certain amount of pressure upon you to opt for the classics instead. I hope you are now grateful to me for my foresight, Mel . . . er, David.'

'Yes, I am, sir. Very grateful.'

'Thank you. However, I did not ask you in here to commend you on your scholastic achievements: they speak for themselves. I wish now to discuss a subject rather different, yet akin in essence. I refer to your position in my house.'

The spit in the bowl of the pipe was beginning to crackle.

‘How do you mean, sir?’

‘I mean this. Next term you will be Head of the School, academically speaking. Which naturally makes you top boy in the house. As you know, Peter Jenkins leaves this term, thus creating a vacancy in the house captaincy, which, ordinarily speaking, you would fill automatically. Or almost automatically, anyway. I warrant I have made the occasional notable exception the past, but in your case a different situation applies. You have been a House Prefect for a year, a School Prefect for a term. You have earned your House Football Colours and Cricket Colours and two School Colours. On those bases you are, I must acknowledge, eminently acceptable. Added to these is the fact that, at the moment, none of your fellow House Prefects can claim a similar catalogue of achievements, although Harrod, with his array of athletic colours, is clearly more successful in the sporting arena. Harrod, however, has a whole year more at Glazebrook, and is only just seventeen. The point at issue, David, is simply this: with Jenkins leaving, you are the obvious choice for house captain for the next term, your last. It is, however’ – the housemaster paused – ‘a situation that is not quite as simple as it might seem. Frankly, in spite of your obvious qualifications, it is an appointment I would make with a certain amount of, er . . . nervous reservation. Who do you think should be appointed to succeed Jenkins?’

‘I don’t honestly know, sir.’

‘If I asked for your advice, whom would you nominate – Barnes, Maxwell, Horne, Bent *major*?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I’ve never really thought about it.’

‘I see,’ said Squires-Birch thoughtfully. ‘But you would agree, no doubt, that you might seem an obvious choice?’

‘I suppose I have a good chance, yes, sir.’

‘A “good chance”, eh? And if you were I, would you appoint Melrose rather than one of the others I have mentioned?’

‘I really don’t know, sir.’

‘Um, I see.’ The housemaster rose from his chair, walked over to the window, his back to David. After a long silence broken only by the puffing of his pipe, the housemaster said, ‘When you first came here, David, you were one of the most promising new

boys I have ever had. In addition to being polite, intelligent and considerate, you were keen, eager, conscientious. You had a kind of . . . freshness, David, almost an idealism, which I much admired and fervently hoped you would keep. I think you did keep that freshness for your first year, but after that time I noticed . . . a slackening and general torpor that I had occasion to mention to you at the time. Do you remember?'

'Yes, sir, I do.'

'The coinage of your character became tarnished, David. Your keenness in your studies became blunted, your alertness on the playing-field sagged, your reliability in the house became less certain. It showed in little things, often trivial, but a housemaster tends to notice these things. I remember having to speak to you sharply about those pictures on the inside of your cupboard.'

'Sir, they were only ordinary photographs out of a magazine, sir.'

'Yes, I remember you saying that at the time. But you must realize that normal boys of fifteen do not go to the trouble of cutting out that sort of unpleasant picture from a disreputable magazine '

'Sir, it was *Life*, sir.'

'I don't care which it was, David, and please don't interrupt. Whatever the magazine, the pictures were not the sort that I like any boy under my instruction to display on his wall.'

'Sir, no one at home would mind if I stuck up a picture of Elizabeth Taylor on my -'

'Please do not interrupt. At home you are outside my sphere of control. Here you are not. Understand?'

'No, sir. Yes, sir, I mean.'

The housemaster picked a new pipe and returned to his arm-chair.

'I don't want to over-emphasize that incident with those photographs, David. I merely cited it as symptomatic of a gradual decline in your standards about that time. Just as your taste in music declined, too. You used to have a beautiful treble voice, and the Precentor told me that at one time you showed great promise as a violinist. Then for no reason at all you gave up your work with the Musical Society and the School Orchestra and took up this loathsome guitar instrument. It might have been

acceptable if you had attempted to play the classics upon it. Another symptom of decline became evident when you took up this revolting jazz music.'

'Sir, it's just as difficult to play jazz well. And more fun somehow.'

'Fun, fun, fun. Is that all you are after in life? Does quality, aesthetic quality, hold neither challenge nor appeal for you? Ever since you have been a House Prefect, the standard of musical taste in the Prefects' Room has lapsed lamentably. The gramophone in there used to play opera, symphonies, concertos. Now all it does is to blare forth this . . . this cacophony you have the effrontery to call music. How any balanced brain can possibly concentrate in such a din, I do not know.'

'But, sir, Django Reinhart is marvellous to have on while one is translating Homer. They're similar in lots of ways.'

'Who?'

'Django Reinhart, and Homer, sir.'

'You bracket this man with Homer? You revile the name of the greatest epic poet the world has ever known by demoting him to the level of some rag-and-bone street musician like this . . . this -'

'Django Reinhart, sir.'

'He is well-named, indeed. I have never heard such a jangle of sound in my life. How someone with the gifts that you plainly have can call that noise music, I fail utterly to comprehend. It is another sign of this decay in your attitude, David. But the incident that gave me most cause for concern of all, as far as your character was concerned, was during my series of preparatory talks prior to your confirmation. Do you recall my talks?'

'Yes, sir. But I only kept arguing because I couldn't really understand all the points, sir, not because I didn't want to understand them.'

'There was one talk in which I know I failed to inculcate any grain of sense into your head. I knew that at the time. Perhaps you recall my getting very heated with you on one occasion?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you remember the subject on which you asked such persistently disbelieving questions?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘On the question of self-abuse, was it not?’

‘Yes, sir. But it was only on one point that I kept asking questions, sir. I mean, I’m sure it’s wrong . . . well, *religiously* speaking, sir, but you said it could badly damage the health of mind and body and I’d read somewhere that this wasn’t true and I just wanted to –’

‘Read where?’

‘In some book, sir. Some medical book.’

‘In this house?’

‘No, sir. In a library. At home, sir.’

‘You know the penalty for being found with that sort of book here, don’t you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Anyway, I do not intend to re-initiate an argument with you now on the moral issue of self-abuse. This whole admission of yours, first that you are still unpersuaded that self-abuse is grossly injurious to health, secondly that you read books on the subject, proves my contention that you have a strong streak of rebelliousness and irresponsibility far from ideal in someone whom I am considering appointing as captain of my house.’

The housemaster gave a long sigh.

‘However, it so happens I have no real choice in the matter. I am appointing you captain of this house next term. With some reservations, I must admit. But I do so in the hope that you will prove those reservations unnecessary. Do you think you can master that responsibility?’

‘Yes, sir, I think I can, sir.’

‘I think you can. I am less certain you *will*, however. But you certainly deserve the opportunity to prove me wrong.’

Squires-Birch stood up, holding out his right hand.

‘Congratulations, David. I wish you luck. God bless you.’

David shook the cold little hand: ‘Thank you, sir. I will do my best.’

‘Good. Remember you have my total support. Never hesitate to call upon it.’

‘No, sir, I won’t.’

‘One final piece of advice, David. At the moment you are too friendly, too easy-going with boys somewhat younger than yourself. I want you to change that attitude, change it radically. It

may be difficult, but it will make your task as captain much easier. I want you to be . . . *bleak*, yes, that's the word. Be bleak. Right?'

'Yes, sir. Bleak, sir.'

David spent all those Easter holidays at Combe. His mother wrote to Lady Barchester-Fensdale with some fictitious excuse about her 'sickening disappointments' at not being able to have Polly to stay after all. David did not discover what particular excuse his mother had invented, but he had no doubt – knowing his mother's imaginative turn of mind – it was a good one. In the end, an excuse had been unnecessary: a letter from Lady Barchester-Fensdale crossed his mother's in the post, containing an obviously equally fictitious excuse about 'Polly's season already being such a mad, hectic rush that she simply can't leave London for a *moment*, otherwise her dressmaker will just not be able to cope.'

He wondered how Jean would treat him these holidays. On the first evening he had a mild shock when a strange maid brought in the pudding. Later, he said to his grandmother, 'Is that a new maid?'

'You are inquisitive, David. Yes, the other one left.'

'When?'

'A few weeks ago.'

'Why?'

'Questions, questions. Because she's gettin' married.'

'Who to?'

'Oh, I don't know. One of the tradespeople, I think. How vulgar you are, being so interested in other people's private affairs.'

'Well, you must be interested too, Granny, to know all the answers.'

'Now don't be impertinent.'

Combe was dull and lifeless without Jean. Almost for the first time in his life he was not sorry when the holidays ended. He was excited about being house captain, because, whatever Squires-Birch thought, he felt sure he could run the house as well as Peter Jenkins had done. And without being 'bleak'. Although the housemaster had not appreciated it, Peter and he had in

fact run the house in harness together. Peter had told him often that, as far as he, Peter, was concerned, David was the only choice as his successor, and that he would tell Squitters as much. Peter – he would miss Peter next term: he had never known Glazebrook without Peter.

He had been privately delighted at the prospect of being house captain – until his mother met him in London on the way to Glazebrook. Her barrage of questions about what he planned to do ('Will you *flog* lots of people, darling, and hold court like a Roman Emperor with lots of little boys running about fanning you when you get too hot? It's simply *thrilling* – I can't wait to come and see you captaining everyone like mad.') momentarily dampened his enthusiasm.

For the first four weeks of the term, his relationship with Squitters was as pleasant as it had ever been. David went out of his way to keep it so; he kept down the volume of the Prefects' gramophone whenever jazz was played, he did not play his guitar whenever Squitters might be within earshot, he even made one or two brave efforts to be 'bleak' when he had to show disapproval of wrong-doers, ragers, late-comers and such. The house ran smoothly and happily.

One Sunday evening when he went to fetch the housemaster for Prayers, Squires-Birch greeted him without his usual pinched smile and said as he swept past towards the boys' dining-room, 'Come and see me immediately after Prayers. I have a most serious matter to which I must bring your notice. In the meantime, I trust you will humbly pray to Him to grant us the guidance we both need.'

During Prayers, David pondered: what could have happened? A crisis involving – what? Someone's death? Someone's parents, perhaps? Had some boy run away? He looked round the kneeling boys – no one was missing. A deadly epidemic striking the school? Squires-Birch was rushing headlong through the prayers, hardly waiting for the 'Amens'.

He followed the housemaster into the study. Squires-Birch walked in short, jerky strides over to his desk, unlocked a side-drawer with a key on his waistcoat chain, produced a large brown envelope. With a shaking hand he offered it to David.

'Here, take this. Do not open it for a moment. I just do not wish to hold it. Sit down.'

David obeyed, furtively feeling the lump inside the envelope in an attempt to establish its contents. It felt like a booklet of sorts.

'I have always paid a great deal of attention to establishing and maintaining a code of behaviour in my house,' the housemaster said, his voice quivering with barely controlled anger.

'Unless a housemaster acts thus, he cannot dictate what I call the tone of the house. This tone is a vital factor in moulding the characters of young men in order to turn them out as potential leaders of society. By leaders I do not mean merely commanding officers. I mean political leaders, intellectual leaders, *moral* leaders. I told you when I appointed you, David, that I had reservations, and it was precisely in this question of your ability to maintain the tone of my house that my reservations were most prevalent. I have always feared that a strong streak of hedonism in your character would conflict with, indeed overcome, any sense of moral rectitude I may have been successful in instilling into you. Anyway, I do not intend to dwell on this point at the moment: there is a more immediate problem to deal with. That is, how to prevent someone rather younger than yourself being corrupted much more dangerously than I hope you have been. I may say, David, in all my years as housemaster I have never found anything resembling *that* in the possession of one of my boys. Open it.'

David unfolded the envelope. Inside was a paper-back magazine called *Cutie*. On the cover was a girl with a large naked bosom, wearing a pair of black-lace panties.

'Look through its pages,' snapped Squires-Birch. David flicked through: on each spread was a near-naked girl in a seductive position that displayed her ample breasts to the best advantage.

David laughed once, helplessly: not so much out of amusement as out of relief from the tension of wondering what the crisis was about. Squires-Birch stared in disbelieving horror, mouthing air like a thin toad.

'Sorry, sir. It's not funny at all,' said David quickly, trying to look very serious indeed. 'It's just that . . . I expected some-

thing much worse had happened. I mean, sir, you can buy this at almost any bookstall in London – I've seen copies of it all over the West End and places.'

David omitted to say there were at that moment several copies of *Cutie* among the magazines in the Prefects' Room.

When the housemaster spoke again, his voice had that metallic, menacing tone which he reserved for moments of deep fury.

'It utterly fails to interest me where you can buy this revolting pornography. Moreover, it is irrelevant. What is relevant is where I found it. You may laugh, but I can assure you I see nothing remotely humorous in the corruption of youth. Nor will you when you reach my age.'

'Where did you find it, sir?' David asked, expecting the answer to be 'in the Prefects' Room'.

'I myself did not find it. It was brought to me by one of the maids, Mrs Cullum, who has been with me for ten years and who knows my standards of morality. She found it in Blundell's boot-box.'

'Blundell, sir?'

'Yes, Blundell. A boy not yet sixteen, not even confirmed, feasting himself on that filth. But that is not all. I spoke to Blundell before Prayers. He is the Prefects' Room fag, isn't he? He says he borrowed it from there and that there are several more copies. Is that true?'

'Yes, sir. But –'

'You will take that thing out with you when you go and burn the lot, do you understand? I want you then to come to me and certify every page has been destroyed by fire. As a penalty, I shall confiscate the Prefects' gramophone until further notice.'

'But, sir –'

'Don't interrupt. Count yourself lucky not to be punished a good deal more severely. I hold you entirely responsible for this: those pieces of pornography would never have been found during the captaincy of any of your predecessors.'

Similar pin-up magazines had been in the Prefects' Room ever since David had become one eighteen months previously, but there seemed no point in pricking Squitters' bubble of illusion.

'Now perhaps you understand why I had reservations about you. This incident has deeply unsettled my already shaky con-

fidence in you. From now on I shall be exercising a closer surveillance on the Prefects' behaviour under your leadership. That is all, except for one thing. I want Blundell flogged. Tonight.'

'What, sir?'

'You heard me. You are to flog Blundell tonight.'

'Why, sir?'

'Why? You ask me why?'

'But I can't beat someone for doing something all your Prefects do, sir, and every other Prefect in the school.'

'Your position may be invidious, but my instructions to you are to flog Blundell tonight. I told him he would be.'

'What do I say it's for, sir?'

'He knows what it's for. I informed him. If you wish for a more plausible pretext, you may tell him his crime as far as you are concerned is the unauthorized removal of Prefects' property.'

'I can't do it, sir.'

'You defy my orders?'

'Well, sir, I honestly -'

'If you defy my orders, I have no alternative but to refer the whole matter to the Headmaster. Is that what you wish?'

'No, sir, of course not. But -'

'You will flog Blundell. Tonight. Then you will burn every square centimetre of that pornography and report to me when you have done so.'

'Yes, sir.' He rose to leave.

'And, David?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Remember the wall of the Prefects' Room is also the wall of my study. I can hear when someone is flogged. It is possible to judge quite easily the severity of the strokes.'

'Do I have to beat him tonight, sir?' It was the rigid custom at Glazebrook to beat wrong-doers before Prayers so they would still be fully clothed, rather than later when they would only be wearing thin pyjamas.

'Yes, you do. You will flog him tonight. And I shall be listening. Now go about your business.'

After tea on the next Saturday, they were all in the Prefects'

Room. Maxwell and Horne were playing chess, Bent was writing a letter, Melrose was reading *Time*.

'Mate,' said Maxwell, moving a bishop across the board.

'Blast you,' said Horne. 'That's two all. Another game?'

'Oh no. Let's have a breather,' said Maxwell. 'God, I could kill Squitters for confiscating the gramophone. It's like a morgue in here with no music. When are we getting it back, David?'

David looked up from *Time*.

'The gramophone? I dunno. When he cools down, I suppose. I haven't honestly dared bring up the subject again.'

'Let's have some music,' said Maxwell. 'Go and get your guitar. Go on. Squitters isn't in – the light's off in his study. Go on. We can have a quiet sing-song.'

'Are you sure he's not in?'

'Look for yourself through the window. He can't be in there with no light on, can he? That study's pitch dark at high noon. Go on – get the old machine.'

David checked through the window that the housemaster's study was unlit, then fetched his guitar. They were half-way through the second verse of 'Foggy Foggy Dew' when the door jerked open. Squires Birch stood in the doorway, hand tight on the handle. His face was pocked red and white, his piggy eyes needles of light. A vein in his neck throbbed visibly. The others looked at David and then down at the floor. David looked at Squires-Birch.

'Give me that thing,' snapped the housemaster.

'Why, sir?'

'Don't ask questions. Do what you're told. At once.'

David handed over the guitar: 'When can I have it back, sir?'

'When you learn not to defy my orders.'

'But, sir, you never said –'

'When I confiscated your gramophone, I intended my action to be punitive, to indicate there was to be no music in this room until further notice. I agree that the stuff you play both on the gramophone and on this' – he hissed with disgust at the guitar – 'should under no circumstances be referred to as music. I will discuss the matter further with you, Melrose, after Prayers.'

'Pinched little shit,' breathed David as the door slammed.

'He's tone deaf, that's *his* trouble,' said Maxwell. 'He must have been sitting in there in the dark. Kinky, isn't it?'

'He's a nut case, if you ask me,' said Horne.

'He's got no nuts, if you ask *me*,' said Bent *major*.

'Nonsense,' said Melrose. 'He's been madly in love with Mrs Cullum for years. And she's a man.'

Chapter 14

A month later, on Speech Day, David Melrose fell in love. He was sauntering round the Old Boys' cricket match when he first saw her. She was wearing a light blue coat, white gloves, white shoes and a wide, white cartwheel hat under which long blonde hair fell to her shoulders, then curved round inwards. She looked, he thought, like Rip Kirby's Honey Dorian.

'Stop staring, darling,' said his mother, nudging him. He moved on, but not before he had noted her companion, a small boy who looked exactly like her – turned-up nose, blue eyes, cornfield-blond hair. The small boy was famous in the Upper School for his looks, the sort of boy who attracts the attention of older boys at a public school. And who revels in it. Wayne, he was called – nicknamed 'Winsome' among the older boys. He boarded at Brandley's, next door to Squires-Birch's. David had often seen him. He had even gone so far as to wink at Wayne on several occasions as he passed him in the street. Once Wayne had winked back.

He had seen this girl for only fifteen seconds, but he knew he was in love with her. Her face hung in his mind's eye all day. He must meet that girl. He planned. . . .

'Darling, you're so silent. Is anything bothering you? The *terrific* responsibility of being Head of the School? Darling, I'm so proud of you,' his mother had said all day.

Next day after Chapel he said jokingly to Manton-Smith, captain of Brandley's house, 'How's Winsome?'

'Oh fine. Blossoming. Dear little creature. Why?'

'You couldn't fag him round to me with a note or something?'

'Oh, God, Melrose. *You're* not joining the ranks of all those with a crush on Winsome, are you? Spend my life sending the poor boy round to people with phoney notes. He's a sort of school pin-up.'

'Can you, though?'

'God, yes. When do you want him? When does the urge strike you, old man? After lunch, tea? I can't send him round after lock-up, I'm afraid, however much you yearn for him at night.'

'After lunch would be fine. Today?'

'Yes, OK, old man. I presume you want him to deliver the note to your room – that's what they all want.'

'Yes, please.'

'Don't spoil the market, Melrose, old fellow. Don't give him any ideas above his station. He's already a bit bum-happy.'

'I just want to meet him, that's all.'

'Ho-ho, that's what they all say. Don't overdo it, old fellow. I don't want his affections alienated or I might cite you as co-respondent, ho-ho. After all, he is my fag.'

After lunch David went straight to his room. Soon there was a polite knock on his door.

'Come in.'

It was Wayne. He offered David a folded-up note.

'From Manton-Smith. Said I was to give it to you personally.'

'Oh, thank you.' David opened the note – on the piece of writing paper in capital letters was scrawled: 'HE'S A LOVERLY LITTLE FELLOW, ISN'T HE? THOSE LIPS!!!'

'Er, Wayne.'

'Yes?'

'You have a sister, don't you?'

Wayne giggled: 'You mean Laura?'

'The one down on Speech Day.'

'Yes, Laura. Pretty, eh? Manton-Smith says she's even prettier than me.'

'Yes: Laura. I wondered . . . is she coming up again?'

'Yes, next Sunday. Why? Are you keen on her?'

'I'd very much like to meet her.'

'Coo, she'll be flattered. Head of the School and all that.'

'Is it possible to arrange, do you think?'

'Of course. Easy.'

'Does she have er . . . a boy-friend of her own?'

'Well, she's coming out this year and there's always *someone* sniffing around. She's not a virgin, you know.'

'Oh?'

'Some boy in Switzerland. Ski-instructor. She was dotty about him, then went mad thinking she was going to have a baby. She tells me everything. I'm her confidant because she doesn't really get on with my mother, you see.'

'How could we arrange it – next Sunday?'

'Easy. Anything you say. She'll be dead flattered.'

'Can I meet you at the Boat-House after lunch then? Perhaps we can take out a motor punt.'

'OK.'

'What will you say?'

'I'll say a friend of mine wants to meet her. Then when she sees you all dressed up and I introduce you as Head of the School she'll be a sitting duck. Do you want to *do* her? I could probably help. Put in a word or two.' Wayne smirked.

'I just want to meet her, that's all,' said David embarrassed.

'Well, I must say, it makes a change for me. You should hear some of the things I get asked to do when I take round notes for Manton-Smith. All in the day's work, I suppose, though.'

'About 2.30 then – at the Boat-House?'

'OK. Fine. Any reply to the note?'

'No, thank you, Wayne.'

'You'd better call me Nicky on Sunday. Make it look real that we're friends.'

It was a hot afternoon.

'Laura, this is David Melrose, Head of the School.'

'How do you do.'

'How do you do.'

Since Wayne had come round with the note, David had thought about little else. What would she think of him? What would he say to her? That morning he had put on a new shirt, shaved with extra care, and dabbed a touch of after-shave lotion on his cheeks – something he never did normally. He had bought the bottle specially.

They met outside the Boat-House. She was wearing a mauve head-scarf and a pink summer dress. David thought she looked even more beautiful than he had imagined her. Too beautiful to touch.

They spent the afternoon going up and down the canal in a motor punt, then had tea in the Cheshire Cat, where David had booked a table. The conversation was mostly between Laura and her brother, David interpolating an occasional question and laughing at the right places. For most of the afternoon he was

content to stare at this vision of idyllic beauty, watching the movement of her mouth rather than listening to what she said.

As tea was ending, Wayne said, 'I'm in the Choir. Afraid I've got to rush now and put on the old surplice. 'Bye, Laura: when are you coming down again?'

'I don't know, Nicky. I'll write. OK?'

'OK then, Thanks for coming down. Smashing. I'll leave you two. Love to Daddy and Mummy.'

'Yes. Behave yourself. 'Bye, Nicky.'

'Goodbye er . . . David,' Wayne said.

'Goodbye,' answered David.

When the boy had left, David said, 'I hope you didn't mind me asking to meet you like this.'

'Of course not. Nicky said you're a great friend of his and I was most flattered.'

'When are you coming up again?'

'In a few weeks. I've got some dances to go to, deady things. I'll be up in July, I expect.'

'Do let me know. I'd love to see you again.'

'Of course. I'll tell Nicky to tell you.'

'I was wondering - would you come with me to the Cricket Ball on Lords' weekend?'

'I'd love to - but I think there's probably another dance I've already accepted that evening. What day is it?'

'5 July.'

'Yes, I think I've got something on then. It's a Friday, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Can I let you know definitely when I look in my little book?'

'Yes, of course.'

The waitress presented the bill to David. He fumbled in his pocket for some money.

'No, no,' she said, opening her handbag. 'When I come up here, I pay for the tea.' She threw a pound note on the plate.

'No, really -'

'Yes, I insist. Please let me do it.' She pouted.

'Oh well, thank you very much, Laura.'

As they walked out of the tea-shop, she said, 'Well, I go this way, back to the station. I have enjoyed today - thank you for the fun boating.'

'Oh that's nothing. Could I write to you, Laura?'

'Please do, if you want to. Nicky will tell you his address. Anyway, it's in the School List.'

'Thanks for the tea.'

'Not at all. You must fly now or you'll be late for Chapel.'

'Yes. Goodbye then, Laura.' They shook hands.

'Goodbye, David. See you soon.'

'Hope so.'

He watched her walk away. She was wonderful, beautiful, heavenly . . . I love her, I love her, I love that girl. . . .

That night David wrote to Laura, saying how much he had enjoyed meeting her, thanking her for the tea, reminding her of his hope that she would partner him to the Cricket Ball.

Three days later he got a letter back saying she was very disappointed but she had already accepted a dinner invitation to the Cricket Ball but hoped she would see him there anyway, and she would be coming up again in three weeks' time.

He was changing into cricket clothes in his room after lunch when there was a knock on the door. It was Nicky Wayne. The boy checked David was alone, came in and closed the door. He offered David a note.

'I had to pretend I was bringing you a note, but it's blank, really. I just wanted to see you.'

'Oh yes. Why?'

'Got a letter from Laura this morning. She's coming up in three weeks' time.'

'Yes, I know. She wrote to me, too.'

'Yes, she said she had. She's rather keen on you, I think.'

'Why?'

'Oh, just the way she put it. She said to ask you out. Are you keen on her?'

'Well, she's a very attractive girl.'

'I don't see it, really. Suppose I've seen her in the nude too often. She's always showing off her Charlies.'

'When?'

'In the holidays. Would you like to see her in the nude?'

'Look, you might get into trouble coming round here like this.'

'You could get me out of it, surely. Head of the School and all that.'

'Yes but – look, just let's fix when and where I can meet you and Laura, then you'd better go.'

'OK, David. Same time at the Boat-House, eh? Do you desire her?'

'I think she's terribly attractive.'

'Do you find her physically desirable?'

'I suppose so, yes. Now look, Nicky, you'd better go –'

'So that means you *would* like to see her in the nude. I took a picture of her almost nude on the beach last summer. With my box Brownie. *She* didn't know – she was asleep, sunbathing, with the top of her bikini undone. I tweaked it off. She was furious when I told her afterwards. But rather pleased when she saw the picture. She's so proud of her Charlies, and they come out a treat in the picture. Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, saith the preacher.' Wayne giggled. 'She's not a bad type for an older sister. I'll tell her you're mad about her. 'Bye.'

The next evening, when David went to fetch Squires-Birch for Prayers, the housemaster wore what he would call a 'bleak' look.

'I want to see you in here immediately after Prayers, David.'

Oh Lord, what's happened now? Since the *Cutie* incident and the confiscation of his guitar, his relations with Squitters had been frosty, to say the least. Yet he could not think of any particular cause for the ominous tone in the housemaster's voice.

'Sit down,' said Squires-Birch, gesturing towards the tattered arm-chair. He unlocked a drawer in his desk. Oh, not another copy of *Cutie*. . . . The housemaster took out an ordinary blue envelope and said brusquely, 'Open this, please.' David saw it had come through the post, the postmark was Glazebrook, dated the day before, and it was addressed in an unknown handwriting to 'D. Melrose Esq.'

'Why sir? What's –'

'Never mind. Just open it in front of me. Then I will explain.'

David tore open the envelope with a mystified sigh. Inside was one sheet of plain writing-paper and a photograph. The writing read: 'Dear Lover-boy, I bet you'd like to get your sweaty hands on thes.' Who knows, one day soon you may do!!! Love and

kisses, Tiddles.' The photograph showed a girl lying on a bathing towel on the sand: she was naked except for the bottom half of a spotted bikini, the top half lying beside her left elbow. It was Laura Wayne.

David folded the letter round the photograph and looked up at Squires-Birch.

'It's just a private letter, sir.'

'Would you have any objection if I read it?'

'Well, yes, sir, I would. It's . . . private, sir.'

'From your family?'

'No, sir. Private. From a friend, sir.'

'A close friend?'

'Not particularly, sir.'

'Well, then, would you have any particular objection to me reading it?'

'Well, yes, sir. I mean, why do you want to read it?'

'What is the postmark?'

'Glazebrook, sir.'

'Exactly. Do you often get letters with that postmark?'

'No, sir.'

'No, I thought not. That is why I noticed it going through the letters this morning.'

'But, sir, there's nothing wrong in -'

'No, no. Not in getting letters from Glazebrook *per se*. It all depends on the nature of the contents.'

'Yes, sir. But this is just a private letter.'

'It's from a bookmaker, isn't it?'

'A bookmaker, sir? No sir. Why do you think that?'

'During Ascot week, David, Mrs Cullum brought me a copy of a popular daily newspaper from your room. On the back page, one horse in each race was underlined and indecipherable marks were written beside each underlined animal. I said nothing about it at the time but since then I have been closely watching your post. The clear implication was that you were backing horses - which, as you know, is an offence punishable by instant dismissal from the School.'

'Sir, I always try to pick out the winners. But I don't bet on them. I just have fun trying to pick out the winners. I'm interested in racing, sir.'

'You've never placed a bet on a horse?'

'Yes, sir. But only in the holidays.'

'You go to race meetings, then?'

'Yes, sir. With my family.'

'And this letter is not from a bookmaker?'

'No, sir. It's a private letter.'

'I don't wish to seem disbelieving, David, but, simply to be reassured, I would like to see this letter myself. Then we can dismiss the whole episode.'

'But, sir -'

'Do you not want me to see the letter, then?'

'Well, no, sir. I mean, it's private -'

'But you said it was not from your family, and not from a close friend. From whom is it, then?'

'A friend, sir.'

'Someone at Glazebrook?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now why should someone at Glazebrook who is not a close friend write to you through the post? Why did they not send you a note by hand, according to normal practice?'

'I don't really know, sir.'

'It would solve the whole question if I could see the letter myself. Have you any objection?'

'Sir, it's an ordinary private letter.'

'Who from?'

'From another boy.'

'This seems very unusual. I'm sorry, David, but my curiosity is aroused and if you flatly refuse to show me this letter I fear I can only assume what I assumed originally - that it is from a bookmaker.'

'Sir, I promise you it's *not* from a bookmaker.'

'All right then, I accept your assurance. In that case you can show me the letter without fear. Come on.' The housemaster stretched out a hand.

'Sir, I'd rather not, sir.'

'I could have opened it myself. I am entitled to, as your housemaster. I did not, however. Because I did not, I expect you to respect that act of forbearance on my part and let me see it now.'

After all, you yourself maintain it is not incriminating. So what can be your dilemma?'

'Well, sir, it's a private letter - '

'Yes, I know. You told me that. I will not betray your trust. I merely wish to have my concern in this matter allayed. Otherwise, David, I shall be forced to suspect the worst.'

'All right then, sir.' David offered the letter.

Squires-Birch pushed his half-lensed spectacles higher up his nose, took the letter and examined it intently.

'Do you know from whom this letter comes?' he said, after reading it through twice.

'Yes, sir.'

'Not a close friend, you say?'

'No, sir.'

'A joke?'

'I suppose so, yes, sir.'

'Is "Tiddles" the nickname of someone, then?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I don't quite understand the reference. What is that in your hand? Was that enclosed in the envelope?'

'Er, yes, sir.'

'May I see it, please?'

'Sir, I'd rather not show it.'

'I think now you have gone so far as to show me the letter, the least you can do is show me the enclosure. It will at least clarify this rather cryptic reference, I presume to the piece of paper in your hand, to "these", getting "your sweaty hands on these".'

'Sir, I'd rather not. I've proved it's not from a bookmaker, sir.'

'I will accept that. I would still prefer to see the . . . photograph, is it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Come on, David. Hand it over. Then we can forget the whole incident.'

'But, sir, you might not understand - '

'Understand? I am not all that imperceptive, surely? I am interested in this reference to "these". On what are you going to get "your sweaty hands"? I can assure you the matter will

go no further. As your housemaster I am entitled to censor your correspondence if and when I consider it necessary.'

'All right, sir. But I don't think you'll quite understand - '

'I think I am the best judge of that. Come on, hand it over.'

'All right, sir. But - ' David reluctantly handed the photograph to Squires-Birch. The housemaster's face twitched; he stared with brightening eyes.

'Do you know this . . . this woman?' He spoke acidly.

'Yes, sir. She's a friend of mine.'

'I see. Do your women friends usually send you this kind of picture of themselves?'

'No, sir.'

'You said this letter was written by someone at this School, did you not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And how, pray, did this boy come to be in possession of a lewd picture like this?'

'He's her brother, sir. He took it, sir, when she was asleep.'

'I see. He's not in *this* house, I presume, and hope.'

'No, sir.'

'Not a close friend, you say?'

'Not really, no, sir.'

'It seems an odd thing for someone to do - to send this type of photograph to a remote acquaintance who happens to be not only captain of another house but also Head of the School.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you know one can be prosecuted for sending or receiving obscene material through the post?'

'Sir, that's not really obscene, is it, sir?'

'Please allow me to judge what is obscene and what is not. According to my standards, and those of most other adult Christians, this photograph is obscene. You cannot have a great deal of respect for this woman if you do not agree. In the context of the photograph, the reference in the letter seems obscene, too. Disgustingly obscene.' He shook the letter viciously. 'I shall have to know the name of the sender.'

'No, sir.'

'You refuse?'

‘Well, sir, I don’t see why – ’

‘There are two alternatives. One is that you tell me now. The other is that I show this letter to all the other housemasters and ask them to identify the writing. It would not take long, but it would be unnecessarily irksome and hardly reflect credit upon you. I should have to explain the circumstances, naturally. Which is it to be? . . . Well?’

‘Will he get into trouble, sir?’

‘No more than a sharp talking to from his housemaster suggesting he learns a bit of common decency. He deserves a good deal more, but in view of the circumstances I can request that the punishment is confined to verbal admonishment. Well?’

‘You insist, sir, do you?’

‘I don’t insist. But if you refuse to tell me I shall be forced to act as I said: to ask the other housemasters to identify the writing.’

‘His name is Wayne, sir.’

‘Wayne. In which house?’

‘Brandley’s, sir.’

‘Thank you. I am glad you took the sensible alternative. Now, apart from stressing that I consider the dispatch of a letter and photograph like this reflects as little credit upon the recipient as upon the sender, as far as I am concerned the incident is closed. Apart, of course, from reporting it to Mr Brandley.’

‘Do you have to, sir?’

‘Have to what?’

‘Report it to Mr Brandley?’

‘I should say I most certainly do. Have I not impressed upon you that the sending of obscene material through the post is punishable by law? And you calmly suggest I omit to report to a fellow housemaster when I discover that one of his charges is contravening not merely the law of the School, but the law of the land?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Right: that is all.’

David held out a hand: ‘Can I have them back please, sir?’

‘Oh no. I think I must hold on to these for the time being.’

In any case, immediately I have finished with this photograph, I will see it is consumed by fire. Good night.'

'Good night, sir. Thank you, sir.'

As the study door closed behind David Melrose, Aubrey Squires-Birch picked up the telephone on his desk and jerkily dialled a number.

'Hello, Tommy. Aubrey here. Could I come straight round and see you on a matter of some urgency?'

'Yes, Aubrey old boy, of course,' said Tommy Brandley. 'What is it - pregnant maid or something?' Brandley laughed.

Squires-Birch was not amused. He said coolly, 'I'll be with you in five minutes.' He put down the receiver without waiting for an acknowledgement.

Tommy Brandley was a bluff barrel of a man, with a large round balding head, wide-apart blue eyes, and a jaw like Sir Roy Welensky. Ex-heavyweight boxer, ex-Rugger Blue, ex-baritone singer, he was revered with a fond but frightened affection by those in his house and classes. His methods of punishment were legendary: he never bothered with such conventional penalties as sending back bad work, or reporting idle or late pupils to their housemasters. If cases of lateness and slackness became too frequent, he would simply cancel a period and take the class on a cross-country run, or lay on a boxing competition for his pupils in the gymnasium. Consequently, cases of impunctuality or slackness were rare. In extreme cases, he would compel miscreants to look after his children for an hour: he had six sons, four of them under seven, as tough and rough as lion-cubs. His Scots wife, in the rare moments when she was not great with child, helped run the Country Dance Society.

Brandley had been a housemaster for only a year. His appointment had caused a certain amount of ill feeling among the other contenders, not so much because of his unconventionality as because he was the first housemaster to be appointed since the war who had not been educated at Glazebrook.

Squires-Birch would never normally have spoken to Brandley except to pass politely the time of day. So it was with a certain amount of concealed distaste that Squires-Birch tentatively opened Brandley's study door and said, 'May I come in?'

'Come in, come in, come in, my dear Aubrey,' boomed Brandley. 'What about a drink – whisky and soda?'

'No thank you. I don't.'

'You don't mind if I do then, do you?' said Brandley, opening a wall-cupboard.

'No, no.'

'Sit down, old man.' Brandley waved at a chair, poured himself a strong whisky and soda: 'Now – what's the crisis?'

'I will come straight to the point This.' He handed Brandley the envelope.

'Hmm, . . . not a bad looking girl, eh?' said Brandley, looking at the photograph. 'Wonder if she knows she was being taken – looks asleep. Could be a bluff, though. Amazing how girls love being photographed in the buff. Does something to their ego, I suppose. I remember a night-nurse in Cape Town –'

He saw the expression on Squires-Birch's face and checked in mid-sentence: 'Well, what's all this about? Do you know the girl?'

'Read that.' Squires-Birch pointed to the letter.

'Oh this. I'd forgotten about this. Came with the photograph, did it? Hmm. "Tiddles", eh? Who was it sent to?' He looked at the envelope. 'Melrose, eh? Good-looking boy that. Getting involved with the crumpet already, eh? Who's "Tiddles" then?'

'That is the point of my visit. "Tiddles" is a boy in your house called Wayne. And that is his sister.'

'Lord, yes. Should have recognized her. Met her on Speech Day. Delightful-looking creature. So Wayne sent this, did he? Pretty good cheek. Does he know Melrose then? Or does Melrose know his sister?'

'That is what I wish to establish. Why do you say "pretty good cheek"?''

'Well, Wayne's a bit of a problem. One of those pretty little boys – the image of his sister, now I come to think of it – who's always got to watch himself. Doesn't help having a lot of rather decadent fellows at the top of the house, either. Inherited them from my predecessor, and frankly I haven't been able to bash too much masculinity into them. Manton-Smith's the worst, but

I had to make him Captain because there's no one else on his level. They think it's clever to adopt this pose of effeminacy, know what I mean? I don't get too het up about it – nothing very serious. Always get this sort of thing at a public school. A little mutual masturbation never hurt anyone: buggery's rather different. But I don't think any of them are buggers.'

Squires-Birch's face was tight and unsympathetic. He said, 'How old is Wayne?'

'Fourteen.'

'*Fourteen?* If you agree, I would like to establish Melrose's relationship with Wayne.'

'Of course. I'll have him in in the morning, have a chat with him.'

'No. Now, if it is possible.'

'Now? 'Course it's possible, Aubrey, but what's all the fuss, all the panic?' Brandley took a long draught from his glass.

'I regard this as a very serious incident involving a fourteen-year-old boy and the captain of my house and Head of the School with the transmission and receipt of obscene material through the post. I would like to pursue inquiries now before Melrose has a chance to inform Wayne that the material is in my possession.'

'Oh, Aubrey, for Christ's sake, aren't you getting a bit carried away? I mean, Melrose has probably got a crush on Wayne's sister and Wayne, being a precocious sort of youth, is cashing in on it. Not much crime in that, though I agree Wayne needs a good sharp rocket telling him not to hawk his sister around like a tart. Then Melrose may have asked him to send it, you never know.'

'Exactly. Either way I wish to establish the facts.'

'Can't you leave it till morning, Aubrey, old boy? It's a bit late now. Wayne'll be fast asleep.'

'Naturally I cannot force you, Tommy, but I have reason to believe there is more to this than meets the eye. I must ask you, if it is humanly possible, to be allowed to speak to Wayne tonight. Or for you to speak to him in my presence.'

'I think you're getting a bit over-excited about all this, Aubrey. But if you insist, then I'll naturally fall in with your wishes. I'll

go and get Wayne now. Take a drink if you want one, frayed nerves, and all that.'

Brandley left the room, slapping his thigh as he went. Squires-Birch's lip curled upwards, as if there was a bad smell in Brandley's study.

Chapter 15

David Melrose lay in bed, unable to sleep. God, what a fool Wayne had been to send that through the post. But then how could he know that Squitters would notice the postmark, and go to the length of having it opened in his presence? That bookmaker line – it could have been genuine, David had to acknowledge. Then surely a bookmaker always sent typed letters, and why should a Glazebrook postmark suggest a bookmaker? There were bookmakers in Glazebrook: Sempill had been sacked a year ago for betting with one of them. But that was only because he had got into debt and not paid up and the bookmaker had had to report him to the Headmaster after warnings which Sempill had stupidly ignored.

What would Squitters do with the letter and photograph? Why had he wanted to keep them? Would Wayne get into trouble? And would Laura ever speak to him again if she heard all about this? He didn't suppose she would take too kindly to the idea of a housemaster seeing her half-naked. . . . But that wasn't his fault, surely: it was Wayne's. Knowing Squitters, David realized the housemaster would be much more suspicious of his relationship with the brother than with his sister.

With a troubled mind, sometime after midnight, David fell asleep. Ten minutes later, he woke with a start to find his light on and Squitters standing by his bed.

'I am sorry to wake you, but I must talk to you urgently,' said the housemaster, pulling the chair beside the bed. David blinked and rubbed his eyes. Squires-Birch sat down.

'I have just come from the Headmaster. You are to see him after breakfast tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir,' said David thickly, still only half-awake. 'Why, sir?'

'About this business of the letter and the . . . enclosure from Wayne.'

'Yes, sir? How did he know about it, sir?' David was now fully awake.

'I had no alternative but to pass the matter on to him. He

must deal with it in his own way.' Squires-Birch had not looked at David since he had come in.

'Why did you have to tell him, sir?'

'This evening, earlier, I spoke first to Mr Brandley and then to Wayne himself. What they both said convinced me this is a more serious matter than I had at first envisaged. I had no alternative, with you being in an extremely responsible position, but to refer the whole question to the Headmaster.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'I am sorry, David. I would have much preferred it did not have to come to this. However, I had no choice.'

'But, sir, you said -'

'I would suggest you now return to sleep' - the housemaster rose and moved to the door ' - and forget everything until 8.25 tomorrow morning. I must ask you not to discuss this matter with anyone. Good night.' The light went out.

'But, sir -' The door shut. There was only blackness and the sound of Squires-Birch's footsteps along the long passage.

'Come in,' said a voice, as David knocked on the door with the brass plate that read "HEADMASTER".

'Ah, Melrose. Come in and sit down.' The Headmaster's study was a high Victorian Gothic room lined with bookshelves, on top of which stood a collection of busts and sculptured heads. A large desk, a cream sofa, and three green armchairs filled the floor-space. On the desk was a framed photograph of Mrs Redwing and her three children, arranged in a studio group. The roar of the gas-fire at full pressure provided a deceptively relaxing back-cloth of sound: even though it was June, the room was cold at this time of the morning.

David sat down. His palms were damp, his heart racing. He watched while the Headmaster closed a drawer of his desk and walked to another of the green armchairs. Dr Redwing was medium height, almost completely bald, thin, with small brown eyes close together, a delicately sharpened nose with flared nostrils, and two moles high on his right cheek out of which grew long grey hairs. The brown brogue shoes he wore seemed incongruous with his black headmaster's gown. David had been in his Divinity class the previous term, but this was the first time

he had faced him alone. His toes writhed inside his shoes as he saw the unsmiling set of the Headmaster's face.

'Now, Melrose,' said the Headmaster, hands on knees in an attitude of prayer, 'last night your housemaster came to see me with some disturbing information. I take it you know to what I refer?'

David nodded and swallowed.

'This is a most unsatisfactory business. You are the top boy in the School, and this position presupposes a certain responsibility and . . . and . . . and . . . aloofness on your part. This letter indicates that to a certain extent you have abdicated this . . . this . . . responsibility. Now, ordinarily, this is a matter which I would expect a housemaster to deal with on his own, without necessarily bringing it to my attention. However, your housemaster feels that, bearing in mind your captaincy of his house and your position in the School, it is out of his ken. Moreover, he feels that under the circumstances he is . . . is . . . is reluctant to allow you to remain in that position. He has said, in so many words, that he cannot allow you to continue as captain of his house. I, of course, utterly understand his feelings. I consider you have behaved most irresponsibly, in a manner unbecoming to your age and position, setting an unworthy example to a boy four years younger than yourself, who should naturally place you in a position above that of the recipient of . . . of . . . of the type of familiar and suggestive material such as he sent you. You follow me?'

'Yes, sir. But I didn't know he was going to send it, sir.'

'Your housemaster tells me the boy Wayne said you had him especially fagged round to you. Is that true?'

'Yes, sir.'

'In your position you simply cannot afford to behave like that. Wayne is considerably younger and junior to you, and . . . and . . . and whatever the motive, Melrose, all sorts of dangerous repercussions can follow. Do you see what I mean?'

'Yes, sir. I wanted to meet his sister, sir.'

'A boy in your position cannot afford to lay himself open in this way. There are other ways in which you could have arranged a meeting with his sister. Anyway, I hardly consider it creditable that the kind of relationship you had with the boy Wayne led to

his despatch to you of a scurrilous letter, over-familiar in tone, and semi-naked photographs of his sister. Hardly an indication of great respect for you or for the girl, is it, Melrose?’

‘No, sir. But –’

‘The situation is that Mr Squires-Birch will no longer tolerate you as captain of his house. I am therefore compelled to back him up. Let me say this. There is no question of your being expelled. You must get that straight from the start. However, it is hardly possible for you to remain here for another month when your housemaster has said he refuses to continue to acknowledge you. Accordingly, he has arranged a plan. He said he would like to inform you of this plan himself, and I agreed.’

‘Sir, you mean I have to leave before the end of term?’

‘Yes.’

‘When, sir?’

‘Next Monday.’

‘*Next Monday*, sir? Why so soon, sir?’

‘I thought I had explained that. Let me make it quite clear again: I am backing up the request of one of my housemasters. If I did not do that, I would be failing in my duty. Do you see that?’

‘Yes, sir. But everyone’ll think I’ve been sacked.’

‘No, they will not. I will explain why. First, no one will know – unless you tell them – of the incident with the letter from Wayne. Secondly, you will be automatically elected a member of the Old Glazebrookian Society. If you had been expelled this would not apply, would it?’

‘No, sir. But why have I left so suddenly?’

‘Mr Squires-Birch has all that taken care of. He will tell you.’

‘What about the Cricket Ball and Lords’, sir?’

‘I suggest you do not appear at either. Simply so as not to stir up controversy and remind people of your absence.’

‘What about my family, sir?’

‘Mr Squires-Birch will write to them explaining everything.’

‘What about Wayne, sir?’

‘I gather that the boy is already in such a state that he is unlikely to tell anyone of his part in the affair. He has been cautioned to keep silent. Let me emphasize, Melrose, once my attention had been drawn to the matter, I had no alternative.

but to back up my housemaster. I much regret the whole unsavoury episode, but I do think that you have acted foolishly and irresponsibly. The fact that you are not being sacked proves that I judge your folly and irresponsibility as not all that serious. Nevertheless, I consider you should not make matters more difficult for yourself by any foolhardy resistance. Is everything clear, then?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Right. You will come and see me at 2.30 on Sunday afternoon for your formal leaving interview. I gather your housemaster will see you this evening. Remember that any leakage of information on this can only have come from you.'

The Headmaster stood up. He had not smiled during the conversation, but he did now.

'I'm sorry. It is one of those unfortunate things. In a month from now it will all be forgotten, believe me. Such things always are. Such indiscretions. . . .'

'Yes, sir. 2.30, sir. Thank you, sir.'

Squires-Birch came into David's room after Prayers.

'No doubt the Headmaster has explained the situation.'

'Well, sir, he said you told him you were not prepared for me to stay on as captain of your house,' said David with force and bitterness. During the day, in spite of the privacy and isolation of his distress (for he confided in no one), he had become convinced that the responsibility for his premature departure, and all the scandal it would create, rested solely with Squires-Birch.

'That is a slight distortion of the facts,' said Squires-Birch acidly, pacing with short steps up and down the room. 'I presented him with the situation, and his solution was as he no doubt informed you. Obviously you cannot continue in a position of trust when the School authorities have no trust in you, can you?'

'But, sir, I don't understand why getting that letter and photograph was such a crime. I don't see why I have to leave so suddenly like this.'

'I don't want to go into all that again, David. If you genuinely do not understand that, then you are obviously unfit to hold this position and I was foolish to have appointed you to it.'

Squires-Birch's manner suddenly changed. He put his right

hand on David's shoulder. David repressed an urge to recoil from his touch. .

'David, the Headmaster has decided and that is that. It is a most unpleasant incident: the only aspect of it that could not be described as unpleasant is that good may eventually emerge from it. I understand completely that you are most upset. I, too, am upset, for I had hopes for you, hopes to which you have not lived up. David, in a situation such as this, when one is conscious of a grand failure, there is only one course open. It is a course I have attempted in the past to direct you towards, but, I fear, without success – if I had succeeded, this would never have happened.'

'But, sir, what will I tell my family?'

'I am coming to that. David, I want you now to turn to God, ask His forgiveness for your sins, ask Him for support in your distress, ask Him for understanding. If you but ask, He will give it. Will you turn to God?'

'Sir, I don't see how God can help now.'

'You may not see that now. Only put your trust in Him and you will not be disappointed. Will you turn, with my encouragement, to God?'

'Yes, sir, of course.'

'Did you pray for guidance last night?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Do you pray, David? Remember my confirmation talks? When I told you that regular prayer to God was the secret of a balanced, healthy, Christian life?'

'Yes, sir. I do say prayers, but I'd never ask God to help in a thing like this because it's – well, out of His control, sir, isn't it?'

'Nothing is out of His control.'

'But He can't stop me having to leave like this, can He, sir?'

'No, perhaps not. But He can make your premature departure the stepping-stone to a newer, fuller, more Christian life – with your own active support, David.'

'How do you mean, sir?'

'I will tell you. No doubt the Headmaster told you of my plan to explain your sudden departure without causing any unnecessary scandal. I think God was moving in His mysterious

way, His wonders to perform, when I thought of it.' Squires-Birch looked demurely at the floor and paused.

Then: 'You remember Father Montagu, don't you?'

'Yes, sir. Why?'

Father Montagu was a well-known figure at Glazebrook. He visited the School every term to give a sermon in Chapel, or to lecture to one of the Societies. He was especially famous for his series of sermons in Lent, because he was almost the only preacher at Glazebrook whom anyone could understand. He was a brilliant speaker and an even more brilliant showman, attending to small details of presentation, such as having all the Chapel lights switched off except for the desk-light on the pulpit, or prearranging with the organist to play a single note or a loud chord at some cue in his talk. Hence all the boys paid attention because no one ever knew what tricks he might get up to next.

Father Montagu was the only Old Glazebrookian ever to become a Dominican monk – an Anglican one. To judge from the frequency with which Aubrey Squires-Birch held him up as an example to emulate, he was, along with Bunyan, Herodotus, and Jesus Christ, one of the Housemaster's pet heroes. Squires-Birch's pupils over the years had all been regaled with the dramatic legend of the Hon. Montagu Finchley-Smith, classical scholar, Captain of the Eleven, who had joined the Grenadier Guards in 1940, won an MC and bar in North Africa, losing an arm in the process, won a DSO in the Normandy campaign in 1944, losing an eye in the process, returned after the war with one of the most glowing records of personal bravery, then resigned his commission to become a monk. Now, in his black cowl, with its one arm sewn up and stitched to his chest, his rope belt, his sandals, his black eye-patch, his tall thin figure, close-cropped fair hair, aquiline nose, sharp blue eyes, and his aura of legendary courage, Father Montagu cut a dashing figure at Glazebrook.

David had met him several times: Squitters always invited him to dinner during his Glazebrook visits, and Father Montagu would officiate at Prayers, scorning the official prayer pamphlets issued to the house and making up his own as he went along.

'Father Montagu is here now. He is preaching next Sunday in Chapel. I have told him all about this. And you. It was from this conversation, late last night, that my plan evolved. It was his

suggestion initially, I must stipulate, but I thought it an admirable one and agreed wholeheartedly. So did the Headmaster.'

'I don't see how Father Montagu can help now, sir?'

'But you did not see how God could help either, did you? Father Montagu is God's special, chosen representative. In your case, truly a *deus ex machina*.'

'Why, sir?'

'Father Montagu has invited you to spend some time at his monastery. Starting next Monday. You will go there straight from here. Unless you violently disagree, of course. In which case the whole unpleasant story would have to be made public. If you go to the monastery, there is a natural explanation for your sudden departure.'

'I don't understand, sir.'

'The Headmaster has agreed that if you go to the monastery the official explanation for your departure will be that you have decided, on Father Montagu's personal invitation, to stay in a monastery to investigate conditions and attitudes there with a view possibly to taking Holy Orders. After your National Service, of course.'

'But, sir, I have no intention of taking Holy Orders.'

'I should wait until you visit the monastery before you make these dogmatic statements. For all you know, God may have chosen you. God may have prevailed upon Wayne to send that letter, upon me to open it, with this very aim in mind. Once at the monastery, you may, like another sinner, St Paul, on the road to Damascus, see a great white light.'

'Sir, but what am I to say to my family?'

'I have written to your mother today, explaining everything. Normally I would have written to your father, but from what you have told me he does not take er . . . a great part in your upbringing.'

'No, sir. Have you told my mother about the letter then, sir?'

'Of course I have. The Headmaster said he would also be writing.'

'Does Father Montagu know, too, sir?'

'Of course.'

'But you said last night you would tell no one else, sir.'

'Circumstances have changed somewhat since then, David.'

Since my talk with Mr Brandley. And with Wayne himself. Have you talked to Wayne today?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, sir. Why should I?’

‘Never mind. David, let me say again how much I regret this whole affair. But I genuinely feel something great and good may come out of it. David, will you kneel with me while I say a prayer on your behalf to Almighty God?’

David looked at his Housemaster in amazement.

‘You have renounced God in the past, more through laziness and lack of understanding than wilfulness,’ went on Squires-Birch. ‘Now, I ask you, kneel with me while I ask forgiveness for you.’

David said nervously, ‘All right, sir. But –’

He knelt down on the carpet. Squires-Birch knelt beside him, one hand on the top of David’s head.

‘Pray now, with me,’ said Squires-Birch dictatorially.

David closed his eyes and joined his hands together.

‘Oh, Lord, receive Thy servant who cometh to Thee in peace and contrition,’ intoned Squires-Birch. ‘Forgive all that is past. Lead him towards a newness of life in which he may fulfil the role of Thy willing servant, pronouncing Thy Gospel, understanding Thy will –’

There was a glistening layer of sweat on the Housemaster’s forehead. The hand pressed into his head, the voice squeaked on, ‘. . . propagating Thy message, so that it may bring him and all those who receive his words gladly to the life everlasting, in the steps of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.’

‘Amen,’ said David, instinctively.

At 9.20 a.m. on Monday David Melrose carried his two suitcases and guitar in its case down to the waiting taxi. The house was empty and silent: everyone was in Chapel. Squires-Birch had chosen the time deliberately ‘to avoid the embarrassment of meeting people as you depart and of having to provide an explanation’.

He took a last look at the notice-board, still covered with bulletins and rosters in his own handwriting and signed by him.

As he passed the yew-bush by the door, the memory of that evening almost five years ago came back. Of all the thousands of times he had gone in and come out of that door that meeting with the girl was the time he remembered. Thousands and thousands of times. Now this was the last time. *The last time he would walk out of that door. . . .*

When he reached the taxi, the tears were rolling down his face.

'Is that all the luggage, sir?' asked the taxi-driver.

'Yes. The rest is being sent home separately,' said David in a cracked voice, brushing away his tears with his sleeve and turning away.

The street was deserted. As the taxi started, the first drops of rain began to fall. Before they reached the corner by Chapel, the shower was in full flood with the heavy drops of a midsummer rainstorm. The driver turned on the windscreen wipers. It was an old Morris, and the wiper-motor gave out a whining noise that soared and fell away with insistent, almost soporific regularity.

While the car waited for a woman to cross, David heard over the whine of the windscreen wipers the sound of lusty male voices singing a hymn. It was one of his favourites - 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling'. Then the engine roared, and the sounds of Glazebrook were blotted out for ever. He pursed his lips to stem the sobs.

Squires-Birch had said goodbye the evening before. ' . . . Of course you will automatically be elected to the Old Glazebrookian Society and entitled to wear the tie. That establishes once and for all that you have not been sacked. Did the Headmaster say anything in particular? '

'He said, sir, you had suggested I should not come up here for three years. And he agreed.'

'That was mooted entirely for your own good, David. I think it would only stir up speculation of a probably scandalous nature if you reappeared up here unnecessarily soon. Surely you would not wish to return anyway, would you? '

'Well, yes, sir. Old Boys' Day, Speech Day, things like that.'

'I'm afraid I must echo the Headmaster and insist you regard the three-year ban as mandatory. For your own good. Let me

say again how much I regret all this, a cruel culmination to a promising school career. But I do feel that, with the help of God, and of Father Montagu, good may well blossom from evil. David I will not see you tomorrow morning: I think it better not. That is why I have arranged for the taxi to come during Chapel. Accordingly, I will bid you farewell now. Please do not think any bitterness accrues on my part. I only hope and pray the same may be said on yours.'

He looked questioningly at David, filling his pipe from the scruffy old tobacco pouch.

'No, sir. No bitterness.'

'Thank you for saying that.' He put the pipe in his mouth, lit a match and said through the puffs: 'I have a small leaving . . . present for you, one . . . I hope will reward you . . . with the depth and spiritualism of its message.' He threw the match into the fireplace and pulled a white book in a cellophane cover from his coat-pocket: 'Here, David.'

It was Robert Bridges' *Testament of Beauty*.

'Thank you very much, sir.'

'Read the inscription inside.'

David opened the cover. On the first blank page, in Squires-Birch's spidery handwriting, was: 'To David Melrose, from his affectionate Housemaster, A.S-B.' And underneath, in inverted commas: 'Tho' much is taken, much abides.'

'It is from "Ulysses". Tennyson. You know the poem, do you not?'

'Yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir.'

'You understand the allusion, do you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I hope you will read it. It is a beautiful poem. . . .'

Later, when Squires-Birch had shaken hands - David noticed tears in those piggy little eyes and looked away in embarrassment - David finished his packing except for the few things he would need in the morning. He lay in bed in the darkness, unable to sleep. His last night at school, the end of childhood, of boyhood. Tomorrow he would be a man, an Old Boy, a tainted Old Boy, banned from his school for three years. How would he explain that? How would he explain anything? None of the other boys knew he was leaving except Maxwell, who had had to be told,

in the strictest confidence, because he would be acting house-captain till the end of term.

And his father. When his father had heard of the situation from his mother he had sent a telegram to Squires-Birch. The housemaster had shown David the telegram the evening before. It read: 'WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING TO MY SON YOU FRUSTRATED SMALL-MINDED BASTARD ARTHUR MELROSE.'

'I think we had better forget this telegram,' Squires-Birch had said, crumpling it up and dropping it into the waste-paper basket as if it carried a lethally infectious germ. David felt acutely embarrassed: he guessed his father must have been drunk when he sent it, for the time of despatch read 11.46 the evening before.

'It does not exactly help the situation, descending to this level of absurd personal invective, does it, David? I am glad to say that your mother - she telephoned me this morning - has been rather more adult and sensible about the whole matter.'

David thought back to the note he had found addressed to him in the letter-rack that morning. It was from Wayne. 'I can't say anything except that I feel very guilty indeed,' it read. 'Please forgive me. I would never have done it if I had thought it would lead to this. It is me who should leave really, not you. Sorry again, a million times sorry. N. Wayne. P.S. You had better burn this. I will explain everything to Laura.'

He had not seen Wayne.

He heard one o'clock strike on the Chapel clock. Then a soft knock on the door. The light went on. Squires-Birch, in crimson dressing-gown, yellow pyjamas and brown slippers, closed the door behind him. David sat up in bed, blinking at the light.

'You weren't asleep, were you? I couldn't sleep either,' said the housemaster softly. 'It is a horrible business this. I wish it had never happened.' He walked to the wash-basin, filled a glass with water from the jug and came over to David: 'Here, take this. It will help.' He offered the glass of water in one hand, and in the other a small pink pill. 'It will help you sleep.'

'Right, sir. Thank you,' said David. He swallowed the pill, drank the water and put the glass on his bedside table.

'There are three things I meant to say to you this evening earlier, but forgot in the anguish of the moment. Lie down, please. The first is that you must not think this unfortunate

episode will in any way affect your career after you leave. It will remain a secret, unless you tell anyone. It will be forgotten, interred for ever. Secondly, David, please remember that God has come to you in the person of Father Montagu. Give him all the confidence you can. He will allay the uncertainties and disappointments you must feel. Thirdly, David, remember this – you are obviously attracted by, attractive to, women – ’

David's head began to swim and his eyes to close. Squires-Birch's voice seemed to come from a great distance, echoing, as if in a great cavern. He heard only words here and there, parts of sentences.

‘Right kind of woman . . . important not to be misled by the wrong kind . . . you are attractive . . . women are all rapacious . . . involved with them to the detriment of your own future . . . creatures of emotion . . . destroyers . . . destroyers . . . destroyers . . .’

When he woke, his alarm-clock read 7 a.m.

‘God, please help me get over this. Please let Father Montagu help me. I know I shouldn't worry about what other people will think, but I do. God, please help. I know I haven't been as good as I should have in the past but. . . .’

Four and a half hours later, he was met at Wake station by Father Montagu, and another very young-looking, dark-haired monk, in a Land Rover.

‘Almost impossible to get a licence as a one-armed, one-eyed driver,’ said Father Montagu on the way to the Abbey. ‘Have to have special controls built on the vehicle. Brother Barry has to act as my chauffeur, don't you?’ And then: ‘I never knew you played the guitar, David. You must play to me one evening.’

Chapter 16

For the first two days at the Abbey, Father Montagu did not once mention God (except when addressing the whole assembly), Glazebrook, Squires-Birch, or the reason why David was at the monastery, at all. David found a great sense of escape in the simple life, in the old fifteenth-century buildings, in the calm, fresh, open faces of the monks. His room was in a converted Nissen hut which had been partitioned into a series of bedrooms, divided by thin plaster-board walls.

'Our visitors' wing,' said Father Montagu. 'I'm sorry – not exactly the Ritz. But I think you'll be quite comfortable. You're the only visitor at the moment, so you've got the shower to yourself.'

Suddenly Glazebrook and Wayne and Squires-Birch seemed an age away. . . . In the late afternoon, Father Montagu suggested a climb to the top of Wake Fell to get a view of the surrounding country.

They puffed and blew up the steep, grassy slope of the Fell. David pointed to a long, thin stone on the peak: 'What's that, Father?'

'Oh, that's our local piece of folk-lore. Called the Wake Stone. One of the earliest examples of a Celtic phallic symbol.'

'How do you mean?'

'Legend has it the local maidens all thought the stone had magic properties. They merely had to touch the stone to ensure fertility. So brides would go through a kind of ceremony on the eve of their marriage, straddling the stone so it touched their genital organs. There is still an aura of legend about the stone in the village, but I don't know of any ceremonies in recent years. Rather charming, isn't it?'

David felt embarrassed. He thought monks did not recognize that kind of thing.

'Quite a piece of stone,' said Father Montagu, slapping it with his palm. 'Let's sit down for a few minutes, enjoy the view.'

The wind blew on their faces, clean, soothing. Chalk-blues fluttered by, the long grass quivered in the breeze. The monastery

buildings nestled below them like a collection of toy houses. Hill followed grey-green hill. Father Montagu pointed out various landmarks of historical interest.

David said: 'Why did you become a monk, Father?'

Father Montagu fixed him with his one eye.

'A lot of people have asked me that question,' he said with a short laugh. 'They think it odd that someone "in my position and with my record" – they all say that – should have become a monk. I don't honestly know exactly why, David. No heroic reasons, nothing spectacular, no suddenly seeing the light, or anything like that. I think the desert helped, in a funny way. It teaches you to come to terms with yourself. I was in it for nearly two years. Then Normandy and so on. I don't know – it was so difficult after the war to know what to do. I had no desire to go into industry, or to go on soldiering for that matter. I had had my bellyful of men competing with men, be it in battle or commerce. I simply thought I could do most for my fellow-men in this role, profession, vocation, call it what you will. . . . Why did you ask?'

'Dunno. I just could never quite picture you as the typical monk.'

'Well, I'd hate to be the typical anything. Vanity, I suppose – an emotion one should suppress. It is a tremendously satisfying task in lots of ways. You can often get a very real feeling you are doing something positive to *help* chaps. Something born during the war, I suppose. In our monastery we can be of very real assistance, practical assistance as well as spiritual, to lots of unfortunate chaps. You will see some of them tonight at supper. And tomorrow, when they will be at their work and play.'

'Don't you ever feel sort of cut off from the world here?'

'I get out and about more than you might think, David. Glazebrook is just one of my ports of call. I am always being invited to give sermons here, lectures there. Last year I went round Europe. It's not a question of vegetating here at Wake Abbey, you know. I can't imagine why people should want to listen to me, but they do. Perhaps they are just intrigued by a one-armed monk in a black eye-patch, I don't know.'

They both laughed. Then Father Montagu stood up: 'Come

on. We must be getting back or we'll be late for Vespers. And that would never do.'

As they ran down the hill, David thought, 'I like Father Montagu, he is so easy to talk to, you feel you have known him all your life, you could confide in him almost any secret. Thank you, God, for bringing me Father Montagu at this time, because I need someone like him. What a change from Squitters. Yet, to give him credit, it was Squitters' idea in the first place. . . .'

At Vespers Father Montagu officiated. The chapel was small and starkly furnished; no hassocks to kneel on and the floor was cold stone. The other attenders were mostly monks, close-cropped and eager, some surprisingly young. The others were a mixture – old men with furrowed faces and slow gestures, too old to kneel on the floor and who leaned forward instead; young men with long hair, sallow skins and bright eyes, dressed in open-necked shirts and dark trousers, some wearing gaudy rings and brightly coloured socks.

At supper, according to custom, there was no conversation. Father Montague read an extract from the Apocrypha, while everyone ate in silence off the bare wooden table and the cracked, cheap plates, using bent forks and spoons and dull knives. The only food allowed was 'natural food from the earth' – it tasted to David as if it had been cooked *in* earth. He almost forgot the rule of no conversation when he wanted the salt and pepper to deaden the taste of the too-buttery fried egg and chips. But he remembered in time and nudged his neighbour instead, one of the sallow youths wearing a large imitation gold ring. David was too interested in his fellow-diners to hear what Father Montagu was saying. At the end of supper he still felt hungry, wished he had brought some chocolate or something edible, something tasty. . . .

'I expect you are tired,' said Father Montagu as they walked out of the dining-room. 'Train journeys always exhaust me. There is another service at ten o'clock but I expect you'd like to turn in now.'

'Yes, I think so,' said David.

'Let me take you to your room. You might not find it in this labyrinth. . . . Ah, I see you are a Bridges fan.' He picked up *The Testament of Beauty* on David's bedside table, and opened

it. 'A leaving present, I see. Aubrey was always keen on Bridges. A beautiful work. Have you had a chance to read it yet?'

'Not yet.'

'I can recommend it most whole-heartedly. Well, I'll say good night then, David. There is a service at 6.30 a.m. Would you like to attend?'

'Yes, please.'

'Good. I'll arrange a call at about 6. Will that do?'

'Yes. That's fine.'

'Good. Then tomorrow you can do the full day's schedule here, see exactly what goes on. Hope you sleep well. Good night, David. It's so nice to have you here.'

'Good night, Father . . .'

'Oh God,' said David in his prayers, as he knelt beside his bed for the first time since he had been confirmed, 'Oh God, please help me, and thank you for sending Father Montagu: please forgive me and bring me to a newness of life, forgetting all that is past, and I will try to be worthy of You, and take care of Father and Mother, because they need You, too, and send them a Father Montague to help them as he is helping me. . . .'

Next day David did not see Father Montagu except in Chapel or at meals. He was left free to roam around the monastery compound as he wished. By supper he found, to his surprise, that he had attended six services that day: and, even more to his surprise, that he did not regret a moment of them. Hitherto, church at home or chapel at Glazebrook had always been an interrupter, a sidetrack from more stimulating pursuits. But here, at Wake, with Father Montagu officiating, it all seemed so different, meaningful, comforting, *elevating*. That day, Squires-Birch and Wayne, even Laura, seemed part of another planet.

After supper Father Montagu said, 'David, come to my study in the old buildings. Perhaps you'd like a glass of our own home-grown wine, and I hope you'll bring your guitar. I'd love to hear you play. Afterwards we can talk over things, and I'll show you some of our valuable first editions. Would you be interested in that?'

'Yes, of course, Father.' The invitation was plainly an honour not usually extended to guests. David felt proud. He followed

Father Montagu up the narrow, rickety, wooden stairs, lit only by paraffin lamps, clutching his guitar close to him.

The study was a tiny room with a low beamed ceiling. The walls were completely filled with musty, dusty old volumes with heavy leather bindings. The room smelt of old books. There was an obviously home-made wooden table, covered with new books on theology, an antique desk with a large blotter and two ornate silver candlesticks, and two battered brown arm-chairs beside the old stone fireplace. There were no curtains on the small latticed window over the desk and no carpet on the wooden boards. The study was lit by one glass-tubed paraffin lamp on the mantelpiece.

Father Montagu took two glasses and an unlabelled, already uncorked wine bottle out of the large bottom drawer in his desk.

‘Let me introduce you to our own Wake Vintage brew. I think you will find it “unassuming in its modesty”, isn’t that the expression?’

David smiled. Father Montagu poured out two full glasses. David noticed they had not been washed since being drunk out of before.

‘Do you like wine, David?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Good. Well, here’s to your very good health.’ They each held up a glass. As his caught the light, David saw the wine was a cloudy yellow. They drank a mouthful. Father Montagu smacked his lips, David coughed once.

‘It’s a bit rough, I’m afraid. Not exactly Pouilly Fumé. What do you think of it?’

‘Very nice,’ lied David. It tasted like a mixture of cheap sherry and grape-fruit juice.

‘Before we sit down and have a chat I’d like to show you some of our rare books.’ For half an hour Father Montagu pulled volume after volume out of the shelves, explaining its interest and value – books in Latin, Greek, old English, poetry, philosophy, religion, natural history. Some almost fell apart when opened; dead insects fell out of their bindings. The dust from them went up David’s nose and he sneezed several times. To dampen his dust-filled throat he sipped his wine, in spite of the unpleasant taste.

They had both finished their second glass when Father Mon-

tagu said, 'Let's sit down now. I must be boring you stiff with all this book stuff, but it's a subject dear to my heart. There's so much I'd like to ask you about. Here - let's fill up the glasses. Not bad stuff is it, really?'

'No. It's delicious.'

'You are a very appreciative guest, David. You are so interested in everything. Naturally curious and inquisitive. It's a good quality: you must keep it. I have the same quality, too. But in your case I have restrained my curiosity since you have been here, because I assumed you would rather be asking questions than answering them. Tell me now though - what are you going to do?'

'I join the Army in three months' time.'

'As a National Service man, of course?'

'Yes.'

'Which regiment?'

'Well, Father was in the Navy and Grandfather in the local TA Cavalry. So there's no family connection. But my mother wants me to join the Windsor Guards because she knows some people in it. I'm not too keen because -'

'Because what?'

'Well, it will be the same sort of people I was at Glazebrook with, and I'd like to meet a new lot.'

'What you really mean is that, with this business, leaving early and all that, you are nervous about facing them again, aren't you?'

'Yes, I suppose that is it, in a way.'

'Aubrey Squires-Birch told me his side of the story. Would you mind awfully telling me your side, David? It might help, getting it off your chest.'

David related the succession of events from his first sight of Laura Wayne on Speech Day to the receipt of Nicky Wayne's letter. Father Montagu filled their glasses again. At the beginning of David's story he listened intently. From about half way through, he began to look markedly less interested. David was so wrapped up in unburdening the story for the first time that he did not notice the change in the Father's expression.

'But, Father, I still don't see where my great crime lay. I see perhaps it was a stupid position to get oneself into as Head of the

School. But Squitters – I mean Mr Squires-Birch – could have just given me a rocket and dealt with the whole thing himself. Even the Headmaster said so. Why did he have to take the matter to the Headmaster and get so worked up about it?’

‘I’ve known Aubrey Squires-Birch for many years. He may be a trifle unworldly – after all he’s spent nearly all his life at Glazebrook. He was there when I was there. But I’m quite sure he would not unnecessarily victimize someone. He’s a very Christian man. No, I agree – according to your version there seems little reason for quite so much repercussion. But are you sure you’ve told me the full story, David?’

‘Yes, Father. I’ve told you everything.’

‘Now, David, it is all past. Nothing you say to me now can affect you or anyone else adversely. You have paid the price and that is that. But wouldn’t you like to get it *all* off your chest, off-load it on to someone else? I am sure you have already unburdened everything to God, but often it helps to unburden everything to another person as well. What about it?’

‘But, Father, I’ve told you everything.’

‘Everything, David?’

‘Yes, everything. What else do you think there is to it?’

‘Well, for instance, David, you are an attractive young man, sensitive, rather impetuous, I should say, someone whose character make-up at your time of life can often lead to indiscretions. Would it not be better for you to get these indiscretions off your chest now? Use me as a waste-paper basket, so to speak? For your own future peace of mind?’

‘Well, Father, I suppose this whole business was due to impetuosity and indiscretion. But I still don’t see it was all that serious.’

‘No. I mean indiscretions of a more serious nature. Indiscretions that can unwittingly lead to . . . corruption.’

‘Corruption?’

‘Yes.’

‘I suppose they thought sending that letter and photograph was corruption. But I didn’t send it, so I don’t see how I can be blamed for any corrupting.’

‘I don’t mean sending any letters. Why did that boy send you that letter and photograph, David?’

'Because he was her brother and knew I was keen on her, I suppose.'

'That's only half the reason. What was your own relationship with the boy? Real relationship?'

'I told you. I'd met him three times.'

'You'd had him specially fagged round to you, hadn't you?'

'Yes. But only to fix up a meeting with his sister.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I am sure.' Warmed by the wine, David was beginning to feel irritated at the tone of Father Montagu's questions.

'I don't believe you are telling the truth, David. It is pointless. Here I am, trying to help you in the name of God. There is *no point*, David, *no point* in lying to me. What was your real relationship with Wayne, David? Tell me.'

'I've told you, Father.'

'By all accounts he is what in my day at Glazebrook used to be called a tart, isn't he?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Did you corrupt him, or did he corrupt you?'

'I don't understand you, Father.'

'Don't play games with me. Why do you think Aubrey arranged for you to come down here if it was not to give you the chance to unburden the memory of your corruptions? If you want to keep everything to yourself, that is your affair. And your error. Remember that part of the Confession in the Communion Service: "We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings: the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable." Did you corrupt Wayne, David?'

'I don't think so. He took the photograph -'

'I don't mean anything to do with the photograph.'

Father Montagu leaned forward and put his one hand on David's knee. The gaunt, aristocratic face with the close-cropped hair was only eighteen inches from David's. The dim light of the paraffin lamp lit only half of Father Montagu's head; his one eye was on the shaded side, so David had to look at the black patch.

'David, you are an attractive young man. I know the sort of temptations our flesh is heir to: I went through all that myself.'

Unburden yourself now, David.' The hand gripped David's knee, tighter and tighter. 'Whom did you corrupt at Glazebrook? Wayne? I'm sure there were more, lots more. Tell me then, David, now – in the privacy of this room. It will go no further. Tell me their names, David. Start a clean sheet. The remembrance of them must be grievous, the burden intolerable. Tell me their names, David.'

Uninhibited by the wine, made acutely uncomfortable by the grip of the hand on his knee and by the insistence of the questions, David suddenly felt a desperate claustrophobia: the low ceiling, the flickering shadows, the dust, the smell. And that spectral eye patch staring unseeingly and relentlessly at him from so close. He jumped forcefully out of his chair. Father Montagu, who was leaning on his knee, almost toppled out of the chair.

David put his wine-glass down on the desk, picked up his guitar and said, 'Good night, Father. Thank you for the wine.' Father Montagu was sitting back, deep in his arm-chair, his head completely in shadow. The voice came quickly, coldly: 'Think about what I've said, David. Perhaps you would like to come up tomorrow evening for another chat. Next time you must play your guitar. God be with you, David. Good night.'

But there was to be no next time. Next morning, during Matins, without telling Father Montagu, without even saying goodbye to him, David telephoned the station for a taxi and caught the first train.

He did not write to Father Montagu. Two days later the Father wrote to him at Sunningdale. The letter began: 'Dear David, do you always treat all your most loyal friends in this cavalier fashion? . . .' He read no more, crumpled it up and threw it in the waste-paper basket.

Chapter 17

A week passed and David received a type-written brown envelope marked 'OHMS'.

'Dear Melrose,' the letter inside read, 'With reference to your application for a National Service Commission in The Windsor Guards, you are requested to report to Regimental Headquarters, Birdcage Walk, London, SW1, at 11.00 hours on Monday, 10 July, for an interview with the Regimental Lieutenant-Colonel. Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I will expect to see you in my office at 10.55 hours on that day. Yours sincerely, L.M.R. Bohun, Captain, Regimental Adjutant.'

'Oh, how *exciting*, darling,' said his mother. 'Lucky you came back early from that monastery. You can wear your smart blue pin-stripe. I used to know a Bohun in the Brigade, Codger, we all called him. I suppose this is his son. *Do* give him my love and tell him I once nearly accepted his father's proposal on a punt in Eights Week.'

His mother, to give her credit, had been more than understanding about his sudden departure from both Glazebrook and the monastery. About the first, all she had said was, 'That silly old Squires-Birch. I tried to make him see sense but I think he had it in for you somehow, darling'; about the second, 'Oh how wonderful for *me*, darling, having you all to myself here for a bit. I thought it most odd you going to that monastery anyway. I imagined you in a cowl and sandals, with all that lovely hair chopped off.'

He was resigned to staying at Sunningdale until the term officially ended, because he did not want to have to explain to his grandparents why he had left early. And facing his father, after that telegram to Squires-Birch.

At ten to eleven next Monday, in his blue pin-stripe suit, stiff white collar, Old Glazebrookian tie, and specially polished black shoes, he walked through the gate in the iron railings along Birdcage Walk. He knocked on the door marked 'Regimental Adjutant'.

'Come in and sit down. You're Melrose, I suppose,' said a tall,

heron-like, sallow-faced man with three pips on his shoulders. 'I'm Bohun.'

'Yes.' They shook hands.

'Left your hat in the Orderly Room?'

'No. I haven't got one.'

'Oh. Officers in the Brigade always wear a hat, you know. Better get that straight. It's the little things that count. Got an umbrella?'

'No.'

'Oh,' said Bohun, nonplussed. 'Almost a uniform you know - hat and umbrella. Better note that down for future reference. Thought you'd know that. Anyway, the Colonel will be ready for you shortly. Sit down. Any thought of becoming a Regular?'

'No.'

'Believe you know another fellow from Glazebrook, Charles Hemsley, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Doing very well. Down at Caterham at the moment, bashing hell into the recruit squads down there. Got the Sword of Honour at Sandhurst, you know. Very promising officer.'

The telephone on the desk rang.

'Bohun. Oh, right, sir. I'll wheel him straight in, sir.' He put down the receiver.

'Colonel's ready for you. Through that door.' He pointed to a side-door in his office. 'Knock, then enter.'

David knocked, heard a voice bark 'Come in,' and opened the door to see a balding, pale-faced man with a little moustache, wearing a Service Dress jacket covered with medals, and a Sam Browne belt, sitting at a table bare except for one neat pile of foolscap. The voice was brisk.

'Melrose? Come in, shut the door, sit down in that chair.'

David obeyed in all three respects.

'So you want to join us, do you, Melrose?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why? Like the badge?'

'No, sir.'

'No family connections with the Regiment, have you?'

'No, sir.'

'You know there's considerable competition for National Service Commissions in the Regiment, don't you?'

'I assume so, yes, sir.'

'What do you mean, you assume so? There *is*, I'm telling you.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Any thought of becoming a Regular Officer?'

'No, sir.'

'Umm. You still haven't told me why you picked the Regiment.'

'Well, sir, I think it's a good regiment and a number of my friends are in it.' David lied, but he couldn't think of any other reasons. The choice of regiment was his mother's, but he couldn't tell the Colonel that.

'Pretty thin reasons, I'd say, what? Now, Melrose. Each applicant for a National Service Commission comes before me for an interview. Before I see him, I demand a confidential report from his housemaster. Naturally, I don't normally attach too much importance to that because public-school housemasters are not usually very good judges of what it takes to make an officer in the Brigade. In your case, however, I found the report – shall we say, disquieting? Disquieting, Melrose. In fact, I can say that of all the prospective officers I have interviewed from Glazebrook – I was there myself incidentally – none has had so disquieting a report as you, Melrose, what?'

'Why, sir?'

'Don't interrupt. I will just leave it at that. It's disquieting, that's all. I see, by the way, you're wearing an Old Glazebrookian tie.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are you entitled to do that?'

'Yes, sir, I am.'

'Right, right, right. Just asked. Anyway, I'm prepared to say this. We in the Brigade, and especially in the Windsors, are keen to get the best possible material as National Service Officers. Regardless of what their housemasters think of them. And some of them have not had exactly glowing reports. Understand, what?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You will join the Recruit Squad at the Depot on 6 October. As for your Commission in the Regiment, that depends entirely

on your behaviour and performance at the Depot. Understand, what?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Nothing except your behaviour and performance at the Depot will affect my decision, right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Right, Melrose. 6 October, then. Good luck. Thank you for parading here today.' The Colonel rose and offered a hand which David shook. 'See the Adjutant on the way out.'

'Yes, sir.'

Next door Bohun said, 'Everything all right, Melrose? 6 October at the Depot. You'll be getting your official call-up papers through the post. Remember what I said about a hat and umbrella. It's the little things that count.'

After David had left, Bohun went into the Colonel's office.

'What did you think of him, sir?'

'Damned cheek wearing that tie when he's been sacked.'

'I quite agree, sir. Charles Hemsley was at school with him and says he was always pretty awful, sir.'

'Well, his confidential report stinks. "Irresponsible . . . unreliable." Doesn't sound like officer material to me, sounds as if he'd pawn the Colours, given half the chance.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Saw Dermot Barchester-Fensdale last night. Apparently his daughter knows him. She says he's definitely known to be a bit queer. Looked a bit queer to me, I must say. Still, we'll see what bashing a little sense into him at Caterham does. Can always turn him down.'

'Yes, sir. One other thing, sir. He didn't have a hat and umbrella, sir.'

'Good God. . . .'

David went to Combe the day after the Glazebrook term officially ended. His grandparents never mentioned the fact that he had to leave early. Whether they had been told or not, David did not know. He stayed at Combe until 5 October.

Only two incidents stood out in his mind from those eight weeks of holiday.

The first was after a dinner with Elaine and his father. His

father, as was the custom at the Dower House if not at Combe, had consumed a considerable amount of liquor. When Elaine left the dining-room to make coffee, David said, 'Father, why did you send that telegram to Squires-Birch?'

His father had not so far mentioned the premature departure from Glazebrook, but David thought the moment had now come, his father seeming to be in a friendly, expansive mood, to bring up the subject. His father's expression changed.

'Telegram? Oh, that telegram. Why the hell do you think I sent it?'

'I don't know, Father. It didn't exactly help matters.'

'*Help* matters? God Almighty. What do you think it feels like suddenly being told your only son is being sacked from your old school for being a bugger?'

'But I wasn't sacked. And I wasn't a bugger?'

'You had to leave, didn't you? Before your time? If that's not being sacked, I dunno what is. Why else if you weren't a bugger?'

'Father -'

'Don't want to talk about it. Perhaps the Guards'll bash some masculinity into you, if they'll have you. Imagine how it feels to be told your only son's a bugger. Imagine it, imagine it.'

'Father, I was *not* a bugger -'

'Why the hell did you leave then? You got love-letters from the boy, didn't you?'

'Not *love*-letters -'

'Don't want to talk about it. Prefer not to be reminded my only son had to leave Glazebrook because of buggery, that's all. What do you think old Tommy Kincham and Bernard Mayfield think about it? Oh yes, it's all round the place down here. Standing joke. Can hardly hold my head up. Don't talk about it. Just hope it's a phase you'll get over. Only son a bugger - imagine how it feels to be told that. By some cunuch of a housemaster whom I never liked anyway. Christ, smoking, gambling, girls, treason, *anything* but that. . . .'

The other incident was a conversation with his grandmother after dinner one night at Combe.

'Just heard a terrible thing, David,' she said over her knitting.

'What's that, Granny?'

'Remember that parlour-maid called Jean we used to have here?'

David looked up interestedly: 'Yes?'

'You know she married some local tradesman here in the summer?'

'No, I didn't. But what?'

'Well, she did. And he was arrested by the police last week for being involved in some car-stealing gang or something. Apparently they stole cars, painted them a new colour and changed the number-plates.'

'How do you know, Granny?'

'Rosie told me this morning. But that's not all. When the husband was arrested, Jean collapsed and had to be taken to the Cottage Hospital. She had a child that same evening.'

'A child? Already?'

'Yes. It was premature.'

'When did they marry, Granny?'

'In April, I think.'

David worked it out in his head. It was now mid-September: nine months ago, mid-December. And it was *after* Christmas that Jean had showed him her engagement ring. So she must have . . .

'How premature was it?'

'I really don't know, David. Probably a fortnight or so. But it doesn't really matter.'

'Why not?'

'Because the baby was still-born. I suppose it's lucky in a way. Rosie said they expect the husband'll be in jail for at least three years and there'd be no money comin' in - unless she starts workin' again. I told Rosie to ask her if she wanted to come back here. Such a nice girl. I wonder why she married such an awful-soundin' husband. Too young, I suppose. Awful about the baby, isn't it? Terrible shock for a young girl.'

Chapter 18

'So you gentlemen are the new Recruit Squad,' said the Guard Commander at the gate of Caterham Barracks to the assembly of young men in tweed coats and grey-flannel trousers who arrived punctually at 1600 hours. 'You look more like a collection of budding fiddle-players to me. Still, we'll soon sort out those long beautiful locks for you. GET FELL IN. THREE RANKS.'

They were marched, in double-double quick time, carrying their suitcases, to a ramshackle hut outside the main group of barrack buildings. There to greet them was their Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Murphy, of the Irish Guards, who sported a Jimmy Edwards moustache.

'Well, me lords, it's not exactly Buckin'ham Palace but for the next twelve weeks it's gonna do you LOT. Answer your names, springing to attention and shouting "Here, Sar'nt," then returning smartly again to the "At Ease" position.'

He read out a list of names. Then he said, 'What a fine lot of hunched shoulders, long hair, and lily-white complexions. I'll tell you - I've seen more shit than the back of an elephant's bollocks, but I've never clapped eyes on a bigger lot of shit than youse. I can see we've got some training to do, you and me. On the command FALL OUT, come smartly to attention, turn to the right and BREAK-AWAY-FALL-OUT-AS-YOU-WERE. Christ, mon, have you all got delayed reflexes? Sharper, sharper, SHARPER—FALL-OUT-AS-YOU-WERE. Oh dear, oh dear, oh DEAR. Mother of Christ, get some speed into those limbs or we won't understand each other at all. NOT AT ALL! Now, unless youse lot want a little piece of exercisin' up and down the barrack-square, for the last time—FALL-OUT. Mother of Christ, I should say so.'

Sergeant Murphy's bark proved to be much worse than his bite. For the next six weeks he and Trained Soldier Cripps of the Welsh Guards ruled the Recruit Squad from Reveille at 6.30 a.m. until Lights Out at 10 p.m. on PT, route marches, drill, weapon training, bayonet practice, internal economy (as scrubbing the barrack-room, cleaning the window-panes, polishing the fire extinguishers, window-catches, coal-buckets and door-handles

was euphemistically called) and shining parades – Sergeant Murphy ruled the roost, the glum Cripps his efficient but taciturn second. Shining parades consisted of sitting astride one's bed, polishing boots or the brasses of a belt, answering Sergeant Murphy's questions on the hierarchy of the Brigade of Guards.

'Who's the Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding the Scots Guards er . . . MELROSE?'

'Lieutenant-Colonel G.M.R. Crichton-Mentieth, Sarn't.'

'Lieutenant-Colonel G.M.R. Crichton-Mentieth, OBE, MC. Christ, mon, where are your manners?'

Sergeant Murphy's gift for the spectacular obscenity was a source of such mirth to the squad that they found it a severe physical effort to sustain the official, intense, lifeless expression demanded of recruit Guardsmen.

Two of Murphy's favourites were: when a recruit was clumsily feeling for the elusive ejection-opening cover on a Bren gun, he would shout, with the perfect timing of the born comedian, 'C'mon, c'mon, c'MON. All it needs is a bit of hair round it and you'd find that hole in a second, wouldn't you, now? I've told you, mon, use your walking-out finger.'

The other was: when any of them had shaved 'inefficiently' and overlooked a bristle or two, Murphy would snap the two sections of his pace-stick together, slowly lift them up and tweak out each hair, saying in a low, sinister voice, 'Now, now, now. Someone hasn't been close enough to their razor-blade this MORNING. And why, might I ask, do you bother to cultivate this stuff up HERE when it grows in its wild natural STATE round your arse-hole?'

At the six weeks' inspection that turned the Brigade Squad from recruits into fully-fledged Guardsmen, David won the accolade for the best kit inspection and the best turn-out on the square. They were inspected by the Depot Adjutant, a bluff captain in the Scots Guards called Duart. Or rather 'Captain The Lord Duart, MC and BAR!'

'Well done, Melrose,' he said. 'I must congratulate you on a splendid turn-out. Keep it up, keep it up.'

'Sir,' barked David.

Sergeant Murphy was delighted: 'You may be a Windsor,

Melrose, but you sure know how to polish boots. Good lad, good lad.'

That was on Friday. The next Tuesday morning, something David had been dreading happened: Hemsley appeared. The Squad had been kept late on a strenuous drill-session on the main barrack-square: there had been five minutes to change into PT kit and parade at the gymnasium. As the Squad were lying on their backs on the floor of the gymnasium doing leg exercises, Sergeant Murphy's voice suddenly barked out, 'Squad, 'SHUN.' They sat up, rigid to attention, looking straight to their front.

There was a murmur from the direction of Sergeant Murphy, who barked, 'sir! Remove your socks and shoes PT.'

As David undid his shoelaces, he glanced to the end of the gymnasium. Beside Sergeant Murphy, elegant and dapper, his long black hair curling round the side of his Service Dress hat, stood Hemsley.

Hemsley and Sergeant Murphy walked slowly along the line of bare feet, Hemsley tapping his cane on his trousers as he walked. David stared straight in front.

Hemsley was now opposite David. David saw only a pair of well-pressed trousers, gaiters and highly-polished boots. The trousers stopped in front of him, the cane slapping them rhythmically.

'This man has dirty feet, Sar'nt,' drawled the well-known voice.

'sir,' barked Sergeant Murphy, undoing his breast-pocket and producing a small note-book and pencil.

David looked at his feet: there was a faint mark round his ankle where he had sweated during the drill-parade. He looked at his next-door neighbour's feet and saw the same mark.

'Look to your front,' barked Sergeant Murphy. 'Dirty feet, sir. Name and number.'

'22416972 Guardsman Melrose D'

'SERGEANT!'

'Sergeant.'

'Any excuse?' said Hemsley nonchalantly. Sergeant Murphy answered.

'No, sir. Dirty feet, sir. Got him in the book, si..

Hemsley passed on, slapping his thigh with his cane.

The next period was a drill parade. Sergeant Murphy marched

the squad to a drill-shed on the outskirts of the barracks, halted them and said, 'This morning one man let down the whole squad. Never before, in all my years as instructor, have I been criticized by an officer for the personal hygiene of my squad. Squad, 'SHUN. Right TURN. Quick MARCH.'

Up and down the drill-shed the squad marched. David counted Sergeant Murphy's 'About Turns'. One man fainted after the seventy-fifth, but the ranks marched round his prostrate body. By the eighty-seventh he had rejoined the ranks. There were one hundred and eight 'About Turns' in all. Then Murphy shouted 'HALT'.

In the ninth week of training the Lieutenant-Colonels of the Guards Regiments came down to Caterham to visit the Recruit Squad and interview applicants for commissions.

'Guardsman Melrose, 'SHUN. RIGHT TURN. Quick MARCH. Right WHEEL. Mark TIME. HALT. Stand at EASE. Guardsman Melrose, sir,' said the Company Sergeant-Major.

'Well, Melrose,' said the Colonel, looking as cold and polished as he had done in Birdcage Walk. 'How are you getting on?'

'All right, sir, thank you, sir,' said David in the official tone of voice, looking straight over the seated Colonel's head.

'Still want a commission in the Regiment?'

'Sir.'

'Umm. You are the only applicant in this intake with a dirty conduct sheet. "Section 40 of the Army Act . . . in that he turned out unfit for parade. Seven extra drills." Why was that?'

David: 'Nothing really, sir.' The Sergeant-Major's pace-stick jabbed David's back.

'Nothing? What do you mean, nothing? Are you suggesting a charge earning seven extra drills is nothing?'

'Well, sir -' The pace-stick jabbed his back again. 'No, sir.'

'Look here, Melrose. I'm here to see all the applicants and tell them their chances of getting commissions in the Regiment. There are seven applicants, five vacancies. Naturally one tends to be prejudiced in favour of those with clean conduct-sheets. Understand?'

'Sir.'

'I daresay it wasn't all that serious a charge, but it makes a difference, Melrose, what?'

'Sir.'

'Frankly, Melrose, I'd say you'd be better off if you went for your second choice of regiment. What was it?'

'The Sixth Fusiliers, sir.'

'Family connection?'

'No, sir.'

'Umm. Well, I don't want to be depressing in any way, but if you like I'll get in touch with the er . . . Sixth Fusiliers and find out the lie of the land, what?'

'Sir.'

'Otherwise I gather you're doing very well, isn't he, Sar'nt-Major?'

'SIR!'

'Good, good. Any questions then, Melrose?'

'Sir, do you mean -' The pace-stick jabbed his back. 'No, sir.'

'Right. Good. March him out, Sarn't-Major, what?'

On 27 April, after four months' Officer Cadet Training at Eaton Hall, David Melrose was gazetted as a National Service Second-Lieutenant in the Sixth Fusiliers. He was due for three weeks' leave before joining his battalion in Germany, and he decided to accept Peter Jenkins's invitation to spend a week with him in his flat in London. Peter had been commissioned into the Grenadier Guards and was stationed at Chelsea Barracks. But he had taken a week's leave which coincided with David's.

At the first *débutante* party David went to, in the Hyde Park Hotel, he met Laura Wayne. He had thought about Laura constantly during his army training, written to her several times, wondered what she was doing: he had cut a photograph of her out of *The Tatler*, dancing at the Pytchley Hunt Ball, and kept it in his wallet.

He said simply, 'Will you dance?' She nodded. She said. 'You do look funny with your hair all cut off.'

'Army regulations. But I'll be able to grow it a bit now.'

'Why, are you an officer now?'

'Yes.'

'In the Windsors?'

'No. 6th Fusiliers.'

'What a funny regiment to pick. I thought you were going into the Brigade.'

'No. What are you doing now, Laura?'

'I'm secretary to an old fuddy-duddy solicitor fellow. Friend of Daddy's. I'm a bit of a fraud coming here tonight. Last year's crop of debts shouldn't be seen dead at this year's parties. But Caroline's an old friend and she said come along. You're not a bad dancer, you know. What are you doing now?'

'Off to Germany in a fortnight.'

'Ghastly fate.'

'Oh, I don't know. I'm looking forward to it. Did you get my letters, Laura?'

'Yes, but I couldn't answer because I didn't know what to say. Your letters were so . . . I don't know – intimate. Thank you for writing, though.'

'Did Nicky tell you all about . . . the business at Glazebrook?'

'Yes. He was terribly . . . upset by it. What a silly old fool your housemaster must have been. Still, nobody worried about it – except Polly Barchester-Fensdale, who went around telling everyone she knew you were "that way inclined" all along. Of course, it didn't cut much ice with me.'

'Christ, what a bitch. Just because I refused –'

'Refused what?'

'Refused to go to bed with her.'

'God, you're in a minority there. She's been in and out of bed with practically the whole Household Brigade since last summer. Why did you refuse?'

'She just got on my nerves, that's all. I wouldn't go to bed with her if I was stranded with her on an atoll in the South Pacific.'

'Well, she seems to have had a lot of success.'

'Laura, would you come on with me after this – to a nightclub or something?'

'I'd love to, David. But I can't very well leave for a bit yet. Caroline'd be terribly hurt. About one o'clock, will that do?'

'Yes, that's fine. I'll meet you at the top of the stairs. OK?'

As he left Laura at the end of their dance, David knew he was more in love with her than ever.

They took a taxi to the Nightingale Room. After they had danced cheek-to-cheek for half an hour, they sat down in a dark corner and David said, as he sipped his whisky and water, 'Are you in love with anyone, Laura?'

'Course not.'

'But you must have gone out with lots of men, someone as attractive as you -'

'Oh, I've gone out with lots of people, but I've never fallen in love with anyone.'

'Has anyone ever proposed to you?'

'Yes, late at night. I've never taken them seriously. They've all forgotten by the next morning - except one who kept sending me roses from Moyses Stevens, saying he'd go on every day until I said "yes". But he cooled down after a bit. No, I don't want to fall in love yet. It's so complicated, falling in love. . . .'

'Laura, I'm in love with you,' said David quietly.

'Oh, David, don't be silly. You've only met me about twice. How can you possibly be? I'm awfully flattered, mind you, but -'

'It's true. I know it, I feel it. I've thought about you the whole time, ever since last summer, since Speech Day.'

'David, you hardly know me -'

'I know you well enough to know I'm in love with you. You are beautiful, you are everything: intelligent, sensible, fun. I think about you the whole time, Laura.'

'That awful photograph Nicky took must have given you ideas, apart from getting you into the most ghastly trouble.'

'No, it's nothing to do with that photograph. I don't think of you in that way, somehow. You are . . . *different*. I love you, Laura.'

She laughed.

'Don't be so solemn, David.'

'Laura, can I write to you from Germany?'

'Of course you can. But you're not going for ages yet.'

'Will you write back?'

'Yes, of course. I don't know what I'll say. Nothing ever happens. But of course I'll write if you want me to. Let's dance, shall we? We're getting so intense.'

After a long, close dance, they edged their way back to their

seats through the tables round the dance-floor. A voice said out of the crimson, smoky gloom: 'Well, if it isn't young Melrose.'

It was Hemsley. Beside him sat a buxom, peroxide blonde bulging out of a low-cut white dress. Laura turned at the voice. David said embarrassedly, 'Oh, hullo.'

Hemsley stood up, swaying, and held out his right arm towards Laura: 'Charles Hemsley.'

David said quickly, 'Oh, this is Laura Wayne.' "

'How do you do,' said Hemsley. He turned towards the blonde at his table: 'Would introduce her but I dunno her name. She's what you might call on the house. What's your name, sweetie?'

'Charlotte,' said the blonde with a high-pitched giggle.

'Charlotte,' repeated Hemsley. Then under his breath: 'Too good to be true.' Then loudly: 'Charlotte, me old dear, this is Miss Wayne and Mr Melrose.'

They all shook hands, Charlotte twittering, 'Pleased to meet you, I'm sure.'

'Well, Melrose, not joining the Regiment after all,' said Hemsley.

'No,' said David.

'He's off to Germany soon,' said Laura.

'Germany? Keeping the old Kraut in his place, eh?'

'Hey steady on, Charlie,' whined Charlotte. 'My mum's from Hamburg.'

'Oh sorry, me old dear,' said Hemsley patting her shoulder. 'No offence meant. There are good Krauts and bad Krauts: your mum's obviously a good Kraut. She certainly fed you up well on cartoffels.'

David guided Laura on. They heard Charlotte say, 'I'm thirsty, Charlie. I'd like some more chmapagne, Charlie darling, there's a love.'

Laura said, 'What a ghastly man. How do you know him?'

'We were at school together.'

Laura peered back at Hemsley, who was now nuzzling Charlotte's shoulder.

'I suppose he's rather good-looking in a funny decadent sort of way.'

David tried to kiss her good night in the taxi home.

'No, David, please no. On the cheek, but not on the lips.'

'Why not? I love you, Laura.'
'Not now. I just don't feel like it.'
'Might you feel like it one day?'
'I don't know, David. I really don't know.'

At 8.15 next morning Peter came into David's bedroom.

'Your bloody mother on the telephone. Do tell her not to ring before nine, old man. Had a thrash last night at the Pelican and the old head's going like the hammers.'

'My mother? What the hell can she want?'

She hadn't rung for days, and never quite as early as this.

'Hello?'

'Hello, darling is that you? Did I wake you?'

'Umm.'

'Sorry, darling. But something desperately exciting's happened. Can't tell you now. Can you *tear* over here immediately after breakfast? I'm in Virginia's flat, Thurloe Place, *you know*.'

'You can't tell me now, then?'

'No, darling. I want to keep it till I see you. I can't *wait* to tell you.'

Christ, thought David, if I get round there and find it's because the poodle's pregnant or the canary's laid an egg, I'll throw something at her. . . .

He rang the flat doorbell at 10.15. The door opened before his finger left the bell. She kissed him more fervently than usual.

'Darling, *wonderful* to see you. Come right in. Got a *terriffic* surprise for you.'

She slid an arm round his elbow and guided him down the hall.

'Got somebody here to meet you.' She grinned at him excitedly, 'Guess who.'

'No idea. What's all the fuss, anyway? What's this special reason?'

'*Guess who*.'

'How could I possibly know?'

'Go on. Have three guesses.'

'I really don't know.' Then in irritated exasperation: 'The Prime Minister.'

'*Near!*' she gushed. He looked at her in amazement.

‘Come on in here and I’ll put you out of your misery, darling.’

Standing by the mantelpiece in the sitting-room was a tall, dapper, dark-haired man, about fifty, leaning on a walking-stick. David recognized him instantly from newspaper photographs. It was Dorian Chingford, MP, Minister for something-or-other, one of the leading lights of the Tory Party. He was wearing an Old Etonian tie, black pin-stripe suit, highly polished pointed black shoes.

He limped towards David, stretching out his right hand.

His mother said, ‘My son, David.’

‘How do you do, David. Sorry about the urgency, but we both wanted this to be a complete surprise’ – turning to David’s mother – ‘didn’t we, darling?’

Darling? David shook hands, looked from Chingford to his mother and back again in embarrassed puzzlement.

‘David, darling,’ blurted his mother, going up to Chingford and sliding her arm through his. ‘Guess what. Dorian’s asked me to marry him, and I’ve said yes. It’s tomorrow morning at Caxton Hall. We couldn’t wait another minute, could we darling? Come on, then, darling’ – she left Chingford and threw her arms round David’s neck – ‘aren’t you going to kiss the blushing bride?’

Chapter 19

'Well, what's it like to have old Chingford as a stepfather?' said Peter as David walked into the sitting-room of the flat.

'How on earth did you know?'

'Your ma just rang, told me the glad tidings, asked me to some pre-nuptial do at the Four Hundred tonight. You cagey old brute, why didn't you tell me before?'

'I didn't know, that's why.'

'Well, the old bird's done pretty well for herself. Not a bad catch, old Chingford. One hell of a smart operator. Must be that gammy leg that gets them. Still, your ma's not a bad looker for her age. Perfect for the Party image, too. Divorced, of course, but the innocent party. Perfect wife for old Chingford – good-looking, madly social, knows all the right people. Perfect for the constituency. That charity work she does'll go down like a bomb. Come on, old man – cheer up – you look as black as thunder. Cheer up – old Chingford may be in 10 Downing Street one day soon, now he's got a wife, then you can flog your mother's life-story to the *News Of The World*.'

David laughed sarcastically. He knew he should be pleased for his mother, pleased that her life from now on would have more point to it, less loneliness; pleased that she was marrying a notably successful man.

But he wasn't pleased at all. The idea of her marrying again was distasteful, even obscene. This distaste had shown in his face when his mother had blurted out the news. And he knew Chingford had seen it.

'Don't think I'm going to take your mother away from you,' Chingford had said when his mother left the room to make coffee. 'But she's awfully lonely, you know. She does need someone, especially now, with you grown up and going abroad.'

Need someone . . . that's what his grandmother had said about his father and Elaine.

'I need someone, too,' said Chingford. 'I need your mother. She's a very wonderful woman.'

What did he need her for – a loving wife or a political expediency? David knew it was uncharitable, but he couldn't get Peter's words out of his head. That business about Chingford needing a wife politically. Could Chingford possibly be in *love* with his mother? There was one blessing at any rate – from now on her stifling attentions would presumably be diverted from him.

Need someone . . . Whom did *he* need? Laura. He needed Laura desperately. Much more, unfortunately, than Laura appeared to need him. But then she might change. She *must* change. . . .

He needed his mother, too. Yes, after all those years of spurning her and hating her presence and her claustrophobic interest in him, he suddenly realized he needed her. And now, she was going to be further away from him than ever. How could he think he hated her, yet now feel he needed her?

And this party she was having tonight.

'We'll ask *all* your friends,' his mother had said. 'Lots of young. Dorian and I have made a list of all your *specials*, haven't we, Dorian darling?'

'Who?' David said, instinctively doubting her judgment.

'Oh, it'll all be a big surprise, darling. You'll see when you get to the Four Hundred.'

David bathed, changed into his dinner-jacket, drank a strong whisky and soda, and left the flat with Peter in Peter's white Jaguar XK 150 at 8 o'clock.

'Mr Chingford's party?' smiled the man behind the reception desk. 'This way, sir.'

From the front page of the *Evening Standard* on the desk, Dorian Chingford and his mother grinned up at him.

'Ah-ah, good evening, David,' said Chingford, pushing himself up on his walking-stick from behind a large table in the far corner.

'Good evening. Er . . . this is Peter Jenkins – Mr Chingford.'

'Oh, come on, David. *Dorian*, please. No more of this Mr Chingford stuff, for Heaven's sake.'

'How do you do,' said Peter. They all laughed nervously.

'Darling, ummm.' His mother kissed him and then Peter.

'Simply lovely to see you both. Dear, I'm quite exhausted already.'

The other seats at the table were all empty.

'Where are the others then?'

'We've asked them for 8.30. We wanted you to be here with us to meet them and introduce them to Dorian, darling,' said his mother.

David saw there were cards on each plate with initials on them.

'Now you're not to look, darling. We want them to be a surprise.'

But David had already seen three of the cards. His own, marked 'D.M.' was at the end of the table. On his right was a card 'L.W.' That must be Laura. Oh hell . . . he was pleased in one way: it would be nice sitting next to Laura. But he had always avoided bringing Laura and his mother together, in spite of the constant suggestions his mother had made that he should 'have her to stay'. Ever since the Glazebrook business his mother had revealed her fascination with Laura in apparently innocent, skillfully introduced, oblique questions. Now they were to meet. It couldn't be helped. But he had a secret dread that his mother would do or say something that would put Laura off him. Put her off irrevocably.

The card on his left was even more ominous. It was marked 'P.B-F.' Christ, trust his mother. . . .

'You must be Laura,' he heard his mother say. Laura was standing behind him, beautiful and elegant in a crimson, strapless evening dress. 'Darling, do the introductions now.'

He felt himself blushing and stammered out the introductions.

'I've heard so much about you from David,' Laura raised her eyebrows and laughed. David said to himself: you bloody liar, you haven't heard a thing.

'Let's all sit down and have a drink,' said Chingford.

'Oh, of course, darling. I forgot about your poor leg,' said his mother. Then to Laura: 'I've put you next to David.' They both giggled.

They all sat down and Chingford ordered drinks. His mother prattled on about nothing in particular. David felt more and more uncomfortable.

Then Peter said, 'Look what the cat's brought in.'

Standing by the table was Polly, in a low, black dress that show a lot of cleavage.

'Polly darling,' His mother kissed her. Polly shook hands with Chingford, kissed Laura, then turned to David.

"Better kiss you. For old time's sake." She put both arms round David's neck and gave him a wet kiss on the cheek. He smelt sweat on her.

'Who's "H"?' whispered Laura as he sat down.

"H"?

'This card on my other side has got "H" on it.'

Then a well-known voice boomed behind him: 'Terribly sorry I'm a bit late. Old rozzer nabbed me in the park for speeding. Hope I haven't delayed the festivities, Mrs McIrose.'

'No, of course not.' And Hemsley sat down on Laura's other side.

During dinner David hardly spoke a word. Polly tried to initiate conversations with him, but he was as rude as he dared be without actually insulting her. After a few tries, she talked to Peter on her other side, dismissing David with a withering: 'All right then. Be stodgy and po-faced if you like, I don't care.'

He knew he *was* being 'stodgy and po-faced'. The evening had already turned out worse than he had suspected, and he was silently furious. Furious at being put next to Polly, furious that Hemsley had been invited, furious that Laura was there to see him at his worst. His mother and Chingford talked together, and – and this infuriated him most of all – so did Laura and Hemsley. In fact, ever since Hemsley had sat down, he had monopolized Laura, occasionally turning to Chingford and David's mother and repeating some remark which invariably caused a burst of laughter.

Then Peter asked Polly to dance. David was about to ask Laura when she rose from her seat.

'Charles and I are just going to have a dance. See you in a minute.'

Hemsley, buttoning up his dinner jacket, gave a sly grin.

'Darling, are you feeling all right? You're awfully quiet,' said

his mother when she, Chingford and David were left alone at the table.

‘Yes, fine, thanks.’

‘Let’s dance, darling. I haven’t danced with you for years. Dorian won’t mind sitting alone for a few minutes, will you, darling?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Chingford. ‘You go and dance.’

‘Darling, you mustn’t be upset by me getting married again.’

‘I’m not in the least upset. I think it’s a very good thing.’

‘You look so down in the dumps.’

‘Well, what the hell do you mean by asking Polly?’

‘She’s a close friend of yours. I was only trying to make it amusing for *you*, darling.’

‘She’s not a close friend of mine. I haven’t seen her for years.’

‘Anyway, she’s a friend of Peter’s, and he’ll enjoy her company even if you don’t.’

‘And what the hell are you doing asking Hemsley?’

‘Darling, it was all a big surprise for *you*. I met him at a cock-tail party last week and he said you’d both been at Squires-Birch’s together and you were his fag or something. He seemed very fond of you. So when Dorian and I were making out the list for to-night I thought it would be a nice surprise for you. Darling, don’t spoil my last evening as a spinster, *please*. I’d so love you to enjoy yourself. Think of *me*. I’ll enjoy it if *you* do, darling. If you look unhappy, it’ll be so awful for Dorian. He’ll be *so* upset. He was in on the list, too, you see. You always make things so difficult, darling. Why can’t you relax and enjoy things like every one else? It’s so much easier if you do. Come on – let’s go back and have a drink.’

Peter and Polly joined them at the table almost immediately. Laura and Hemsley were still dancing. His mother loudly whispered, ‘Darling, you will ask Polly to dance, won’t you. It would be so rude not to, after sitting next to her at dinner. So *unnecessarily* rude. And she’s really looking quite pretty tonight. It would hurt her so much if you spent all the time with Laura.’

So she was still match-making. His mother said, ‘Come and dance with me, Peter. Dorian darling, you don’t mind, do

you? There are so many gorgeous young men to choose from tonight.'

Chingford laughed. Peter rose embarrassedly from his chair.

'Go on, darling,' whispered his mother, pushing him towards Polly. 'Ask her.'

But Polly had already got up.

'Come on, handsome. We'd better trip the light fantastic.'

'Don't look so unhappy, you old weed,' Polly said, as they were dancing. 'Anyone'd think you had an Oedipus Complex.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Well, sulking like this just because your mother's getting married again. You've hardly opened your mouth all evening.'

She was trying to dance close, but he forced her apart. He said, 'Everybody else was talking to each other. That's why I didn't speak much.'

'Looked like jealousy to me. A bit keen on La Wayne, aren't you?'

'Why?'

'Oh, the word gets around, you know. She's not bad. Bit snooty for me. She was certainly hitting it off well with Charlie. First time they've met, isn't it?'

'No. They met the other night in the Nightingale.'

David stole a glance over Polly's shoulder. Hemsley and Laura were still dancing, Hemsley talking into Laura's ear, Laura laughing.

Polly said, 'Daddy's just given me a new car. An Alfa. Super machine. Have you got a car?'

'No. I came in Peter's Jaguar.'

'Want a lift back in mine? I'll let you drive.'

'No thanks. I'll be going with Peter.'

'Oh OK, stick-in-the-mud.'

David saw Hemsley guiding Laura back to the table. He broke away from Polly and followed them. He pulled back Polly's chair for her to sit down. Then before Laura had a chance to sit, he said, 'Dance, Laura?'

She nodded. Hemsley said, 'What about a dance with the bride, Mrs Melrose?'

His mother giggled, 'Oh dear, I do feel I'm neglecting you, Dorian darling. But with all these glamorous young men around

me, I must live it up on my last night. You're not jealous, darling, are you?'

Chingford bridled while she chucked him under the chin.

David and Laura followed Hemsley and his mother.

'Why are you so subdued tonight, David?'

'Well you were talking most of the time to Hemsley. I didn't get much of a chance to say anything.'

'He's quite a character, Charlie. My first impression that night in the Nightingale was quite wrong.'

David felt irritation rise inside him.

'I can't stand him.'

'Why ever not? He was frightfully complimentary about you. Said it was such a pity you weren't joining his regiment after all. Some business over no vacancies or something, wasn't it?'

'Laura, will you come on somewhere with me after this? Just us two?'

'David, I'd love to. But Charlie's already asked me and I said yes. I thought you'd be going back with your mother. If only you'd said earlier. I never thought -'

'Oh it doesn't matter then,' he said angrily.

'Don't get so shirty about it,' she answered, equally angrily. 'He asked me first. One can't be telepathic.'

David let go of her hand: 'Come on. Back to the table.'

'Oh, all right. If that's the way you feel.'

His mother was waiting: 'Darling, it's nearly midnight and Dorian and I think we should leave you all to have some fun on your own. The bride mustn't see the groom after midnight, remember. But you stay. See you at nine in the morning. Ugh, how early. But we'll have a little celebration breakfast before setting off for Caxton Hall. Don't pay for anything. Dorian's taken care of everything.'

Hemsley and Laura went straight off to dance again. Peter said, 'Look old man, Polly's said I could have a spin in her new Alfa. Thought we'd look in on old Chris Buckmaster. Some free booze and a good mob around. Can you bring on the Jag?'

'OK. I'll hang on here for a bit,' said David. 'See you later then.'

Secretly he had no intention of going. Peter could be dropped home by Polly: he was going to wait. He might still succeed in

persuading Laura to ditch Hemsley and go on somewhere with him. Peter's car would be useful.

Peter and Polly left saying 'See you then.' Peter handed him the car keys.

David sat alone at the table while Hemsley and Laura danced. He realized he was quite drunk. He must have had at least eight glasses of champagne. He ordered a large brandy. Dammit, Chingford was paying, why not? When he had finished the brandy, Hemsley and Laura were still dancing. He ordered another. I'll stick this out, he said to himself: she *must* see through that smooth piece of shit sooner or later. . . .

'We're thinking of moving on somewhere,' said Hemsley in his ear. 'Why don't you come on, pick up a bird at the Nightingale, make up a foursome?'

Hemsley's smile was faintly mocking. Laura looked demurely down at the floor, fiddling with her bracelet.

'I'm waiting here for someone,' lied David. 'You go on. I might join you shortly.'

'Just as you like,' said Hemsley. 'Don't get too pissed, though. Old stepfather's footing the bill, isn't he? Come on then, old girl. Let's head for the Nightingale.'

'Good night, David,' said Laura. She kissed him and whispered, 'Don't get so het up, don't take it all so seriously.'

Hemsley repeated, 'See you then, old man.'

As they reached the hall, David saw Laura slide her arm through Hemsley's, and whisper something in his ear. Hemsley stopped and buckled up with laughter.

David drank another brandy. The sound of the band and the chatter of couples round him rose in a maddening crescendo.

'Excuse me, sir,' said a voice in his ear. It was the waiter. 'Your mother left these.' He held out a cardboard box full of gull's eggs. 'Ordered them for her wedding breakfast tomorrow. Can you take them, sir?'

'Yes, I'll take them.'

He took the box and stood up shakily. The waiter steadied him by the elbow. He walked past the reception desk to a chorus of 'Good night, Mr Melrose', out to where Peter had parked the Jaguar.

The doorman held open the door for him, and he gave him

half-a-crown. He turned down Charing Cross Road, through Trafalgar Square, under Admiralty Arch, along the Mall. Then he realized he was far too drunk to drive. He pulled erratically into the side at the end of the Mall, switched off the engine. Then the tears welled out, tears of anger and helplessness and self pity. He didn't really know what he was crying about, but he cried like a child in loud racking sobs.

He mopped up the tears, then suddenly gritted his teeth and pursed his face in fury.

'All right then,' he shouted at the top of his voice. 'Go to bloody hell, the lot of you. The whole mucking lot of you.'

He wrenched at the steering-wheel with both hands and tried to shake it. It had started to rain. The drops made a tattoo on the Jaguar bonnet. A heavy lorry drove down the Mall behind him, its spotlight inaccurately focussed. As it approached the Queen Victoria statue, the beam of the spotlight lit up the face of the Queen, smug, disapproving, aloof. Then the lorry turned left towards Buckingham Palace Gate, and the face was thrown once more into darkness.

He saw the box of gulls' eggs on the seat beside him. An idea struck him. He picked up the box, opened the car door, walked unsteadily across the road, climbed over the looped metal railing and up the white marble steps.

He scarcely noticed the rain.

'It's you, you pompous hypocritical old bag,' he shouted up at the statue. 'You *bitch*. It's all *your* fault.'

He picked out a gull's egg from the box and flung it at the unsmiling head. It missed by several feet. Another and another he flung, bawling out curses as the eggs cracked and splashed on the impervious white-marble figure. One egg hit the figure smack on the nose. The yolk splayed and dribbled down over the chin, on to the regal, imposing bosom.

He let out a vicious, gratified roar.

'I'd come down here if I was you, sir,' a voice boomed behind him. A torch shone in his eyes as he turned. A large police constable stood in his cape beside the railing. David walked unsteadily down the steps in the torch's beam.

'I think you'd better hand that over to me.' David obeyed.

'Gulls' eggs, eh? You must be well-lined to be throwing these about. That your car over there?'

'Yes, officer.'

'You're in charge of a motor vehicle then?'

'Yes, officer.'

'Where have you come from?'

'From a party.'

The policeman laid the box on the base of one of the lion statues.

'Well, you'd better come along with me. Just get down your particulars before we go. Name?'

'Melrose. David Melrose.'

'Melrose . . . David,' the policeman repeated, writing in his notebook. He suddenly looked closely into David's face: 'Was this party by any chance before a wedding, sir?'

'Yes, officer.'

'A wedding tomorrow?'

'Yes.'

'Are you by any chance any relation to the cr . . . lady who is to marry the Right Honourable Dorian Chingford, MP, tomorrow, sir?'

'Yes, officer. She's my mother.'

'Your mother, sir. Saw the picture in the evening paper.' The policeman's voice took on a new tone of quiet deference. Then a momentary suspicion: 'Er, do you have on your person any means of identification, sir?'

'Yes.' David fumbled in his wallet, produced his driving licence. The policeman flashed his torch on it.

'Thank you, sir. That's good enough. Just a formality, sir.'

The policeman quickly scanned the pavements.

'Now look here, sir. I appreciate the festive nature of the evening. Tomorrow's obviously a big day for the family. Still that's no excuse for going around throwing these things at public monuments, is it?'

'No, officer. I'm sorry. I got a bit carried away.'

'Now look, sir. I suggest you take this box, get back in your car, and go quietly on home. I'm prepared to let the matter rest there. A case of youthful high spirits. Nothing more serious than that.'

‘Thank you, officer. Thank you very much.’

‘See you don’t let it happen again, sir.’

‘Yes, officer.’

‘Right, sir. Sorry to have kept you standing out in this rain, sir.’

‘Not at all, officer. Good night.’

‘Good night, sir.’